I Speak as One in Doubt

Margaret Hazel Wilson

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I Speak as One in Doubt.

A Thesis Presented

by

Margaret Hazel Wilson

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2019

Department of Art
I Speak as One in Doubt.

A Thesis Presented

by

MARGARET HAZEL WILSON

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DEDICATION

To my mom,
who taught me to tell meandering stories, and that learning, and changing, is something
to love.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

I SPEAK AS ONE IN DOUBT
MFA
MAY 2019
MARGARET HAZEL WILSON
B.F.A., ALFRED UNIVERSITY
M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST
Directed by: Professor Alexis Kuhr

A written thesis to accompany the M.F.A. Exhibition I Speak as One in Doubt. Blending epistolary format and visionary narrative, the artist addresses her complex relationship to her Catholic upbringing.
I am taught inwardly in my soul. Therefore I speak as one in doubt.
-Hildegard von Bingen

Hear, my lords, the words of Marie, who, when she has the opportunity, does not squander her talents.
-Marie de France
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PROLOGUE: BILDER AUS DEM GEISTE

I am in the business of making images. For a long time my images were made of ink pushed into paper. Now my images are made of pixels and wax, plaster and gold leaf and the furniture my father made in shop class when he was seventeen. Now my images are made of my body, my self draped in white eyelet cotton, walking or standing still or sleeping. Pressing text into communion wafers with my glasses sliding down my nose.

For the next seven years my images will be made of text.

In fall of 2017 I read a book that turned out not to be relevant to the independent study I was pursuing, but incredibly formative to my developing studio practice. The book was *An Anthropology of Images, Bild Anthropologie* in its original German, Hans Belting’s text on his image theory. Belting has jumped the shark in recent years, but he has some great ideas and he’s a Byzantine scholar so I am driven by the instinctive urge to trust him. In defining the *image* as it pertains to my work, I’ll share this passage from *Bild Anthropologie*:

A work of art—be it a picture, a sculpture, or a print—is a tangible object with a history, an object that can be classified, dated, and exhibited. A image, on the other hand, defies such attempts at reification, even to the

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1 This phrase translates from German in the most basic sense as “images from the imagination,” but is more appropriately for the context of this paper allowed to exist as “___ out of the ____”, wherein *Bild* by the most broad translation available could mean “image, picture, photo, painting, illustration, portrait, scene, drawing, sight, reflection, tableau, reflexion, or vista,” and *Geiste* as “spirit, mind, ghost, intellect, wit, psyche, imagination, or wraith.” *Geiste* is a word with particular weight to me as I first read it in Jeffrey Hamburger’s description of the process through which women’s visionary experiences were scrutinized: “’Unterscheidung der Geiste,’ the art of differentiating between trustworthy and unreliable dreams and visions.” Broad translations taken intentionally from Google, with a debt of inspiration owed to Belting and Hamburger. My thanks to Kevin Holm for his advice on syntax.


2 Fall of 2017 was a time of pause for me, in which I put material things aside and read, deeply, for a long time. I learned in those short months more about myself and the kind of maker I want to be than I can possibly express, and I thank Susan Jahoda and Sonja Drimmer for protecting that space and time.
extent that it often straddles the boundary between physical and mental existence. It may live in a work of art, but the image does not necessarily coincide with the work of art. The English language distinction between ‘image’ and ‘picture’ is pertinent, but only in the sense that it clarifies the distinction between the ‘image’ that is the subject of our quest and the ‘picture’ in which the image may reside. At a fundamental level, the question of what an image is requires a two-fold answer. We must address the image not only as a product of a given medium, be it photography, painting, or video, but also as a product of our selves, for we generate images of our own (dreams, imaginings, personal perceptions) that we play out against other images in the visible world.³

There is a lot of valid dialogue happening in the art world, especially the academic art world, around the making of objects. Should they be made, why are they made, what happens after they’re made etc. However while I do produce objects in the course of my practice, I find it hard to situate myself in that dialogue, because objects are not the end product of my work, nor is the process of making them something that I particularly care to share with my viewers other than as evidence of time spent. Objects, along with performance, architecture, light, and time based media serve as material for image making. The final image is the work, and the work reflects the image that originates in my body.

Before I can make the image I have to be able to see the image. This for me is the artmaking process, and what it means to be an artist. This is why I often find the term “image maker” to be a more appropriate label for myself than artist. The “work of art,” which could be an object, a picture, or a hypothetical situation or encounter originates in its purest form in the imagination. What follows is my attempts to translate that ideal “work” into the world via various media. This has impacted by practice by blurring the lines between media, as the media is chosen for its capacity to communicate the “meaning” of the ideal image. This extends beyond even the media which typically falls under the heading of the visual arts. For example, in my opinion text is a perfectly viable media in which to communicate my images, if it is the best suited as a vehicle for the meaning I desire. In this sense I see my art practice and my art historical writing as inherently equal processes. They are simply two different media which I employ at different times for different purposes. The overarching end goal is still to communicate the image.
Hildegard von Bingen was also a maker of images. Her images lived in text, in song, in the costumed performances of nuns under her rule, and in illuminated miniatures. Media served as a screen for the divine visions that licked up like flames from her soul. Did these images actually come from God? I don’t believe that. Others do. Whatever their source, these images were conceived in Hildegard; in her soul, her imagination, her intellect, ihrem Geiste.

I am not exactly like Hildegard. I can only stand comfortably with one foot in the institution, at least a religious one. But even less so am I a Desert Mother. That would require leaving the institution altogether, which I have never done. It is not out of self-deprecation when I say that my public attempts at heterodoxy have been tentative at best, and illegible at worst. Bowing to the institution is, of course, no guarantee of safety.

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4 Hildegard von Bingen was a twelfth century German abbess, mystic, prophetess, and author of musical, theological, and medical texts. She was born a tenth child in 1098, and given to the religious life by her parents as a tithe. She was famous figure in her own time, known as the “Sybil of the Rhine,” and highly sought after as a religious, moral, and political advisor to “half of Europe.” In her writings Hildegard utilized a unique set of imagery to express her theology. Perhaps most well known is her concept of “green vigour” or viriditas. As Atherton says “For Hildegard ‘greenness’ means the force which gives life to the body and renewal in nature; in a religious sense it signifies both the power of the Spirit at work in the world and the moral force that gives light and fruitfulness to human actions.” Mark Atherton, “Introduction,” in Selected Writings: Hildegard of Bingen, trans. Mark Atherton (New York, Penguin Books, 2001) ix.

5 The “Desert Mothers” refer to a retroactively associated group of women hermits and ascetics from the first centuries of Christianity. Like their more well documented counterparts the Desert Fathers, these women in various capacities left behind society and material possessions in favor of, you guessed it, the desert, seeking a life of extreme poverty, solitude, and prayer. According to medieval hagiographic legend the first of the Desert Mothers was Mary Magdalene, who lived out the remaining thirty years of her life after Christ’s Passion as “a recluse in a cave in a treeless, waterless desert near Marseilles.” The imagery of the Desert Mothers and Fathers also holds a clear Scriptural resemblance to John the Baptist, “the voice crying out in the desert.” The Desert Mothers did sometimes live in communities of “consecrated virgins,” essentially the precursor to formal monasticism as it would arise in Europe. I’ll admit I know much more about the Desert Mothers as exotic figures in my childhood Lives of the Saints than I do as a medieval scholar, but the image remains a striking one for me of the movement of women before the fetal institution of the Church had found its rigidity. There have been many occasions in my life in which I declared to my amused mother that I would be leaving the world behind and “going to the desert.” Margo King, The Desert Mothers: A Survey of the Feminine Anchoretic Tradition in Western Europe. Peregrina Publishing Co. 2014.
Plenty of perfectly orthodox “heretics” were burned at the stake along with their manuscripts. Regardless, I cling to the ivory tower. It is my joy and solace, whatever caveats of patriarchal oversight I may yet have to contend with. I think in the course of my life and practice I have made academia into my own convent. In that I see a sameness with Hildegard, and the monastics and Beguines who followed in her legacy. These are the makers that I place myself in lineage with. I place myself in this heritage because of the moment between the conception image/picture/scene/tableau, das Bild, within meinem Geiste, and the translation to the material world that follows. That is the closest moment that I can compare to Hildegard’s visions. Unsure of what I see, I nonetheless feel an urgency to know, probe, question, and translate. In that moment of seeing, I can speak as a true believer and also, with joy, as one in doubt.

In the remainder of this prologue, let me clarify something that I’m not sure I’ve ever said with enough emphasis: I grew up Irish Catholic in the least interesting sense of the word. There were a lot of Bing Crosby records played in the house and I had one, maybe two aunts who collected shamrocks and claddagh jewelry. We went to Mass every Sunday because that was the will of my mother’s mother, unless we woke up with

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6 See note 7.
7 The eleventh and twelfth century saw the birth of the *beguine* movement in Northern Europe. Caroline Walker Bynum provides a helpful summary of their activities. “These women set themselves apart from the world by living austere, poor, chaste lives in which manual labor and charitable service were joined to worship (which was not however, rigidly prescribed as it was in convents). Initially, at least their practice contrasted sharply with traditional monasticism, since they took no vows and had no complex organization and rules.” Beguine communities became quite popular among lay women and were the source of many famous mystic visionaries such as Beatrice of Nazareth and Mechthild of Magdeburg. Their rise in power would lead to pressure from the Church to conform to formal monastic rule by the late fourteenth century. Heretical accusations would also be directed at these mystic women, resulting in several “burned Beguines,” the most famous of whom was Marguerite Porete in 1310. The condemnation of her writings would be used to fuel a downward turn in public opinion toward beguines, and lead to the overall decline of the movement in favor of strict enclosure for women monastics. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, (Los Angeles and London, University of California Press: 1987) 17. Petroff, Elizabeth, “Visionaries of the Early Twelfth Century” *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Petroff (New York and London:Oxford University press, 1986)
a headache or had too much work to do before Christmas dinner at four PM (the irony is not lost on me). Our home parish had pastel, almost Unitarian stained glass that let in light and made all the candles almost pointless. We drank alcohol at the dinner table (or ever, that I saw) twice a year, with a sip at New Years because otherwise how would you toast? Everything I knew about female monastics I learned from *The Sound of Music*, *Sister Act*, and from the grumpy nun who ran the school library. The frightening, magical parts of Catholicism, the ones I rediscovered three years ago in an art history classroom, were revealed to me only in flashes, like the five foot wooden crucifix my grandmother displayed in the stairwell beside all of her patriotic regalia.

It literally took me until my twenties to voice aloud to a friend what turned out to be our mutual longing for a female community, one that had nothing to do with the nuclear family, that could exist alongside the religion that had very quietly driven us out. Faith was never on the table, but we had a bizarre shared sense memory-that-never-was of a mystic aesthetic centered on gold and dripping candle wax and wild asceticism. It didn’t mean anything to stop going to Mass but it somehow meant something to accidentally eat meat on a Friday and feel the ritual energy drain away. It meant something to hear a chorus of female voices. It meant something, when I cracked open my first Caroline Walker Bynum text at age twenty-three and realized that the fantasy we’d joked about, that we had seen the ghost of in our grandmothers, had been real. The female ascetics, the theologians, the visionaries, they were real, powerful, great and terrible. They were ours. Mine. I could make meaning, by looking at the images they gazed at with devotion, the objects they touched, the texts that they authored, and the

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8 I want to note, in fairness, that *Sister Act* is a great movie, and that singing “Hail Holy Queen” with rhythmic hand clapping in my middle school choir was a brief and joyful moment of oneness with the female divine in an otherwise grey wash of patriarchal depression.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctjG4MjJwEA
architecture their bodies moved through. If image-making is the how of this project, then the desire for meaning, unrelated to the morality of religion but fascinated by the mechanics of it, how it has shaped centuries of bodies and generations of women, is the why.
Figure 1. Installation image of *Confirmation* by Margaret Hazel Wilson. Photograph by Leah Burke, April 29th 2019.
A LETTER FROM THE ARTIST TO HER ADVISORS ON THE TOPIC OF CONFIRMATION

And the lord’s handmaiden described her vision thusly:⁹

Thinking on the mysteries, I found myself in what may have once been a cloister garden,⁰ surrounded by trees that may have once bowed with the weight of their green and verdant leaves. I was dressed in soft white, as I was when I was consecrated as a child. I lay flat on a dais, made of white stone tiles, slightly more white than my dress and certainly whiter than the warmth of my skin. The oval of stones was cool and dry to my touch, and it was not unpleasant to be lying there, though they carried with them a sense of death to come. It occurred to me that I was like clay, and there I was laid out in a

---

⁹ I begin this passage in the third person as a nod to the confessor/scribe, i.e. the male cleric who served as recorder and essentially translator to the female visionary experience. All women monastics “confessed” to a male cleric, which resulted in many of those clerics recording visionary experiences on the women’s behalf, particularly if they weren’t considered literate in the medieval sense. These priests often also held the responsibility of recording the mystic’s vita, or hagiographic life, which greatly shaped how their narratives were received by the greater spiritual community. Dyan Elliot investigates at length the “traumas” of this relationship to a female visionary, but also its necessity: “Female mystics tended to become more dependent on their confessor/scribes as the Middle Ages progressed. Such a dependence was grounded in the soundest of self-protective reflexes. The number of female mystics accelerated at a steady rate over the course of the Middle Ages, particularly lay mystics, whose uncluttered status was regarded with alarm. The clergy’s skeptical response can in part be gauged by the proliferation of the genre directed to the discernment of spirits, since Satan can transform himself into an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). The female mystic’s scribe/confessor by necessity became something of an ad hoc expert in this kind of discernment, guarding her, and by association himself, from the shallows of heterodoxy. The fates of “heresiarchs”—women such as Marguerite Porete or Guglielma of Milan—demonstrate the dangers of inadequate or incompetent mediation.” I find this relationship to be an appropriate allegory for my own place overall as a previous participant in a patriarchal institution, both anxiously seeking protection and also resenting the constant filtering of an unseen male voice. It seems right, if sad, in addressing this piece that I begin with a bow to the forces I have allowed to buffet me about for the last twenty five years or so of my life.

⁰ The cloister is a square garden or other green outdoor space surrounded by an enclosed walking path which served as a place for monastics to ambulate and contemplate. The cloister was the central non-church building of any medieval convent or monastery. The garden was a living part of the community, providing food as well as medicinal herbs etc. and was a site of communal labor.
plaster mold. This weak form of alabaster crumbled and went chalky under my nails but I knew that when pressure was applied my bones would break before the tiles, which were thick like paving stones. Written in the stone, whispering to me in a soft and soothing voice, was the Ave Maria. It was so soft that I strained to hear, but I knew it well, and was comforted though I knew the pressure would be coming soon to bear. I accepted this murmured prayer of centuries and in my white dress I lay in the white dish and waited patiently for this deathly sacred circle to become my sepulchre.

But then a woman’s voice cried out! This was not the whisper of the Angel Gabriel, but a strong voice, a matriarch who had never borne children. She called me to life, to rise up, to serve the Most High. She in her singing and shouting, tried to pull the green vigour back into the dead garden. I could hear it in her every word that she wanted the sand beneath my dais to burst forth into a field of grass and fruit and every good growing thing in Creation and she wanted me to till the soil for it. And for a moment, just a moment which might have been a minute or a year or my twelve years of Catholic school, I wanted to heed the woman’s words, but I was confused. And in my doubt I found I could not move, for I heard in this voice, dear advisor, a dissonance that I still do not fully understand. At once it shone gold to my ears and bled red and flowed over the ground like water, crying out for me to rise and run and speak, and yet it called me, called us, timid and frail, and reminded me of all the instabilities of my childhood. I couldn’t understand and so I remained still and quiet, and listened to all I could hear. The truth, when I cleared my eyes to see, was that the garden was dead and would not be restored to the woman’s vision. The garden would never bear me fruit. But when I tried to speak I had no voice, and the woman continued, telling me every good and
beautiful thing that our garden would yield because of my efforts, with the help of our Father.

The woman’s voice grew so loud, pressing down upon my spirit, that in my weakness I pressed my face to the cool white stone and let sleep take me.

Since I learned to read text has registered to my mind as two things: a flickering light and a speaking voice. The light is best compared to a film reel, jumping from word to word in quick succession; each word is a cell with a border between until I reach such a speed that the gap becomes unnoticeable. This is what meets my vision. Complementary to that is the voice. She is the interpreter of this swiftly moving river of hieroglyphs. She receives the text in sequence and from that builds a meaning. Keywords may jump out and the interpreter will pause to consult our library, locating the matching entries in the card catalogue that add dimension to the new content we take in. Through it all her voice delivers the text to me, smooth, low, and cogent.

This is assuming the eye moves across the text in sequence. Left to right, top to bottom. When confronted with a field of text, the sense of sight can lose its orderly approach, and the interpreter takes on a more chaotic, even overwhelming tone.

Text is not only language, but a field on which to rest one’s eye.¹¹ Not necessarily a friendly field. A plane of text is like a plain of wheat, soft to walk through but sharp and brittle when one stops for too long and lets their weight fully settle on the broken stems underneath their feet. One can pass their eye over a large sum of text and see nothing, but the moment one rests there are words, prodding and poking at our language processors without taking a pause for the rest to catch up. This is a separate problem

¹¹ See figure 4.
from text which is deliberately obscured for other purposes, like in the Insular gospels, whose incipit pages were stylized into illegibility for a more spiritual mode of reading.\textsuperscript{12}

Legible text, text intended to be read, engages the voice, or many voices, shouting to be heard. Faced with a field of text the only way to silence the voices is to close my eyes.

Closing one’s eyes is a lonely choice, dear advisor, but so is keeping them open and hearing the voices. This is fundamentally a lonely vision, the way that preferring to read alone as a child is lonely, or the way that a woman singing a duet to herself across a television screen is lonely.\textsuperscript{13} There is sound, and text, but the state of solitude is only amplified by their presence. Hildegard’s voice, in the vision and in the work, is lonely as well.

I want you to reassure me, and then I will be certain! In a vision two years ago I saw you as a man able to stare at the sun without flinching, a courageous man. And I wept because I blush so much—because I am so timid! Good Father, through your kindness I have found a place in your soul, so that now, if you will, you can reveal to me through your word whether you want me to say these things openly or whether I should keep quiet. For I have great trouble with this visionary gift about how much I should say of what I have seen and heard. And sometimes, because I keep quiet, I am laid low by the vision and confined to my sickbed, unable to raise myself up. So I am sad, I lament before you: I am unstable with the movement of the wooden beam of the wine-press in my nature, the beam which grew at the prompting of the devil from the root in Adam (for which he was cast out as a wanderer in this exile world). But now I raise myself up, I run to you, I speak to you. You are not unstable, you ease the pressure of the wooden beam, you gain the victory in your soul! And it is not only yourself alone: you raise up the whole world to salvation! You are the eagle staring at the sun!\textsuperscript{14}

This passage, dear advisor, is the sacrament of confirmation from the point of view of the earnest recipient, the twist being that there is no reply coming. When the timid, blushing

\textsuperscript{12} See figure 5.
\textsuperscript{13} See figure 6.
fifteen year old finally peels away to reveal the feral, lamenting visionary crying out for relief from the weight of the wine press in her nature\textsuperscript{15} the Church reveals itself for what it is: a lot of uninspired and bumbling men. Ecclesia as a patriarchal force is powerful and by extension so are priests in a way that allows for horrific abuses but as individuals they, and those that work to uphold their structures of power, are ineffectual at best and outright apathetic at worst. They are not stable, or courageous, and the first glint of light off the sword that pierces your breast has them turning their eyes down and away, until the silence wears off all of your sharp edges and you’re just sitting blankly in the CCD class with the others.\textsuperscript{16}

At least, that’s the journey that confirmation took me on, right across the finish line and into the realization that none of it mattered. I took the class, I wrote the essay, I

\textsuperscript{15} The Nature of medieval theologians was a prelapsarian one that represented all that was good and perfect, in the words of Albert the Great, Nature in its “maximally natural state.” The Fall, however, introduced another nature that was not so naturally natural but was instead the result of reason’s subversion. This postlapsarian nature is responsible for many aspects of the human condition that are today regarded as given: gender difference, sexual desire, and involuntary emissions, to name just three. Appeals to Nature by medieval theologians always invoked the prelapsian maximally natural state, rather than the corrupted nature that was necessitated by the Fall.” This passage by Karma Lochrie complicates Hildegard’s phrasing (and by extension my own) regarding the wine press upon our natures. After all, within this metaphor what is the wine press, and what (or which) nature are we discussing? I would argue that the wooden beam is, essentially, internalized misogyny (“the beam which grew at the prompting of the devil from the root in Adam”), pressing down on the pre-Lapsarian Nature that we might have otherwise enjoyed. That constant squeezing is enough to make anyone a little unstable. Karma Lochrie, Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn’t (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) xxii.

\textsuperscript{16} CCD, is the acronym that in contemporary Catholic circles has come to encompass all supplementary religious education for children and young adults, i.e. Sunday school. This includes the initiation processes for most of the adolescent sacraments, including First Confession, First Communion, and Confirmation. The literal expansion of CCD is “Confraternity of Christian Doctrine” and actually refers to an institution originating within the Church in 1562 in the effort to establish a lay, or non-clerical (though one never did get far from the clerical in these cases) organization for the teaching of official Catholic doctrine. The 21st century American reality of this four hundred year Tradition is putting thirty fourteen-year olds who don’t want to be there in a musty classroom in a church basement while a condescending motherly instructor goes over the bloodless version of the bible stories they’ve had memorized since infancy and makes them do asinine group activities like write their own future obituaries. Medieval context taken from: Glancey, Michael, “Confraternity of Christian Doctrine,” The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 3. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908)
stood on the altar and let the Bishop touch his thumb to my brow wet with holy oil and name me Margaret Hazel Esther Wilson, knowing knowing *knowing* that I felt nothing. That it *meant* nothing. I wasn’t there to be welcomed; to be made an adult in the eyes of the Church. I was there to be pressed into the mold, left to cure, and laid into the path for men and my grandmother to walk on until I wore down to nothing but dust and the process could start again with my daughters in my place.

And I felt nothing. Not anger, not fear, not even guilt for my obvious spiritual lacking (because belief was never really the point, was it?). No, dear advisor, in the face of this untruth I closed my eyes and slept, because it is easier. It is pleasant, even, to turn one’s face away and succumb. For when you slip away into dreams even the shouting of the woman (you are the eagle staring into the sun! for since I was a child I have never felt secure, not for one single hour!) becomes white noise. A warm blanket, weaving your grandmother’s words slowly into your mind and pressing you slowly and inexorably into the seal matrix.

And what is this seal matrix? It isn’t only the bronze or iron mold of medieval kings, waiting for soft wax to conform to its grooves and produce new bodies to replicate the immortal *dignitas*. No, this seal matrix is made of plaster. Plaster in the hands of the mold maker functions in different ways. Like iron, it holds its shape. Clay can be pressed into it, and made to conform to a predetermined form. However, perhaps one of the most

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17 The imagery of the seal matrix in this work owes significant intellectual debt to Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak, who has written extensively on the function of seals as surrogate bodies in the Middle Ages. As for *dignitas*, I look to Ernest Kantorowicz and the seminal *The King’s Two Bodies*. Rather than the duplication of the kingly body via the medieval seal as a means of distributing legal authority, I intend a more insidious use of the seal, wherein lay bodies are impressed with the “image” of the Church. Via this indoctrination (used here in its purest sense) our bodies, particularly female bodies, serve to perpetuate the patriarchal values of Catholicism. Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak, “Medieval Identity: A Sign and Concept” in *Medieval Coins and Seals: Constructing Identity, Signifying Power* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2015) Ernest Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, rpt. 1985)
noteworthy functions of plaster is how it absorbs. Plaster doesn’t only hold the clay in shape, it leeches out the moisture. Plaster takes until the smooth and flexible clay turns to leather, and then, eventually, to fragile and brittle greenware.

So in closing here is another reading on this vision: I, a grown woman, lay on plaster tiles. They are not cool and dry and smooth anymore. They are cold and wet and brittle. They break under my elbows and hips as I try to rest. They leech the moisture from my skin and the life from my bones. I am free to rise from this shallow sepulchre at any time, but I don’t. I hold my eyes closed. I breathe evenly. I ignore the people who watch in silence. I remain, because of the woman’s voice. I stay on the chipped offering plate even though I could walk away and have my freedom because I am kept warm, barely, by the red cloth. The red cloth soaks in the sun and if I am patient and keep my eyes closed I will be allowed the flashes of gold from the woman’s words as the clouds above ebb and flow. Those flashes, the echo of that voice, keep me on the dais. And it isn’t the text that is speaking to me, but rather what hums underneath, the candle light catching on the tesserae mosaic. Know us, the voice calls. Find us. We are here, and we are like you.

It will be worth the bowing, the woman promises. It will be worth the slow, drugging cold and sharp edges of the slab because there is knowledge here to seek. Don’t cut it all away, she pleads, and in my weakness, or my greed, I stay.

After all, dear advisor, why do daughters go to church, long after their brothers have started staying home?

They go because their mother asks.
Figure 2. Installation image of *Iconoclasm* by Margaret Hazel Wilson. Photograph by the artist, May 1st, 2019.
A LETTER FROM THE ARTIST TO HER ADVISORS ON THE TOPIC OF ICONOCLASM

It was a cold spring day after a long dark winter when I found myself transported in the spirit to a vast and empty basilica. It was a dark and hollow space, and there was no decoration to be seen, not even a crucifix behind the altar. And this was good. It was right to my sight and to my hearing, that there was no gold. There was no shimmering mosaic, there was no dark and luminous stained glass, there were no books held open on the altar with satin ribbons to reveal the bright scarlet and jewel blue of the illuminator’s work. These things had once been, and had been stripped away, I could tell though I had just arrived. They had been shattered, or plastered over, or buried deep underground to rot, and I was overcome with a vicious and sad sense of triumph.

“I was transported in the spirit” is a phrase borrowed from St. Elizabeth of Schönau, a twelfth century German visionary and nun. Elizabeth is a pertinent figure to reference both the sense of bodily fragmentation in this piece, as well as it’s sense of both rejection of and longing for institutional authority. My choice to gesture towards Elizabeth in the opening of this letter is best articulated by this section from Petroff’s introduction to her visionary narrative: “Illness was a central fact in her life, and in her written works it always precedes visionary attacks; she describes extreme pain, along with a sense of strangulation or suffocation. She describes her combination of illness and visionary experience as martyrdom, and her language echoes that of Perpetua. It would seem that this conviction about herself as a martyr allows her—in visions—to bypass the limitations on women’s roles in the institutional church. No priestly mediation is necessary for her communion with the divine, for just as the experience of martyrdom gave women in the early church as status like that of priests, the visionary martyrdom gives her a priestly kind of authority. Many of her visions come when she is prevented from taking communion; she then sees the host, the pyx, a dove plunging its beak into the chalice, the wine turning to blood. In the course of her first long illness, during which she experienced many visions, she saw the Virgin Mary standing by the altar and wearing the vestments of a priest.” Petroff, Elizabeth, “Visionaries of the Early Twelfth Century” Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature, ed. Elizabeth Petroff (New York and London: Oxford University press, 1986) 141.

I am collapsing timelines in combining the iconoclastic fervor of both the Byzantine crisis and the Protestant Reformation. In England to this day they are still pulling alabaster sculptures out of the courtyards of previously Catholic and now Anglican churches that had been buried in the interest of protecting them from sale or destruction. William Anderson, “Re-discovery, collecting and display of English medieval alabasters,” Journal Of The History Of Collections 16, no. 1 (May 2004): 54.
want those things, knowing the blood soaked price? At the same time I wanted to cry, because without them what was left?

I was taken over by a morbid sense of terror and I felt as though I were standing inside a corpse that I myself had murdered. To ward off my child-like fear I searched the space for any source of light that could interrupt the darkness and discovered hanging on the wall a series of small white slabs. They were hung with wicking and the smell of burned matches still lingered in the air. When I touched one with the tip of my finger I met the cool press of non-flesh and realized they were wax. Though I was in darkness the wax reflected my warmth back to me, and the touch felt kind. I pressed my hands to the wax and was shocked to find they stayed behind when I pulled away, filling the strange non-bodies like flame fills a candle. They fluttered like butterflies in a jar, free from me yet trapped. I looked down the row of wax forms and following a strange compulsion I filled each one, splitting myself apart until I was only a string of lights, a row of votive candles slowly burning out in an abandoned church. It was as though I had no body at all, and the terror I had felt earlier gave way to a strange and melancholy flood of relief.

As I existed in pieces, in a plurality of non-bodiliness, I reached half-heartedly upward. I flexed my hands that weren’t and wiggled my fingers, feeling the insubstantiality in a pleasing way. I realized, as my warmth was absorbed into the wax, that I was being subsumed into the empty building itself, light dispersing into negative space. I felt, that for a time, this was good. I was an empty basilica, and I would endure the loneliness for the chance to fill it as I chose one day. In the meantime I breathed, I flickered, and I let my foundations sink slowly into the earth until I awoke.

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Have you ever actively wished that you didn’t have a body? I ask this making a crucial distinction between not having a body and being dead. Although in this line of thinking, what is the body but a dead thing entrapping the spirit (der Geiste)? How could one possibly know the true purpose of the mind when it is stuck in a short, round shouldered body that chemically shuts itself down at the first sign of danger? Maybe you can’t relate to this, dear advisor, but all I can say is the first time I ever looked at an image of myself made only out of light on the wall it felt dangerously good.

Let me tell you about a time I nearly succeeded in getting rid of my body, or rather, a time I reduced it greatly. I’m twenty-one years old, and I’m in one of those summer internships where they’re very kind but don’t pay me. I realize, after about a week, that without a car it’s forty-five minutes to a grocery store and also that paying for my sublet is going to require money that a weekend only catering job is barely going to cover. Something, dear advisor, has to give.

I stop going to the grocery store. I eat one meal a day. Coffee becomes a warm and filing oasis to my mind and my stomach. I walk a mile to and from my non-paying job, up a hill. Over the course of twelve weeks I begin to disappear. And this is not a fast, dear advisor. There is nothing beautiful or spiritual about it. I am just hungry. It is a cold process, a calculated one, as I begin to hear a new voice. This voice isn’t Hildegard. I ripped that voice out of me by the roots (no more icons, no more images, no more gold). The voice makes me feel powerful, in control, and it makes starving (just a little) into a game. I don’t yet know about the female ascetics, who lived for eighty days on only water and the Eucharist, but I make myself into one of them. Hunger becomes a site of

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20 This is a play on simplistic medieval dualism (soul=good, body=bad) but sadly a sentiment I found shared among many of my female peers age seven to twenty-five. Another quote relating to this topic that becomes troubling when read through this lens is one often mistakenly attributed to C.S. Lewis: “You do not have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body.”
transformation, a slow sublimation into the ecstatic.\textsuperscript{21} I tear down my image and wearing
the five sixths of it that is left I return from the desert in September to be hailed a
visionary (you look great you look great you look great). I have survived iconoclasm, and
can now begin my own counter reformation.

This process is one I do not plan to repeat (unless I get sick, unless I get worried,
unless I can make myself a new body out of pixels and \textit{light}) but it is a siren call. The
issue with this process is that it hates the body. It, I, this vision, we understand the body
as something separate from our “self.” We think that perhaps the body can be stripped
away, and the mind set free, but it cannot. Because without the body there is no screen.
Without the body, there are no more images. And so the vision hangs in suspension. It is
a ghost, waiting for resolution. Waiting for the body to return, and with it the gold and the
mosaic tile and the images.

Have you ever sat in a James Turrell, dear advisor, for an hour?\textsuperscript{22} Have you ever
let the people come and go and just watched the colors like a flickering candle flame,
until your eyes turned inward and you saw your own soul glowing warm and cold and
flaming livewire hot? Standing in the light, it’s easy to see the cathedral in Turrell, as
plain and whitewashed and plastered over as it is. He lives in a church, a meetinghouse,

\textsuperscript{21} One cannot speak of food and medieval mysticism in the same sentence without paying
homage to Caroline Walker Bynum and her seminal text, published in 1987 at the height of
“heroin chic” in the American imagination, \textit{Holy Feast and Holy Fast}. While her work deliberately
avoids pathologizing the fasting habits of medieval women ascetics, she nonetheless identifies a
connection between women, control, and the body that any contemporary intern learning to feel
hunger for the first time could relate to. “Not only was food a more significant motif in late
medieval spirituality than most historians have recognized, food was also a more important motif
in women’s piety than in men’s. For certain late medieval women, fasting became an obsession
so overwhelming that modern historians have sometimes thought their stories preserve the
earliest documentable cases of anorexia nervosa. ...Eating God in the host was both a sweet
tasting that focused and transcended all hunger and an occasion for paramystical phenomena of
the most bizarre and exuberant sort.”
Caroline Walker Bynum, \textit{Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to
Medieval Women} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987)
\textsuperscript{22} See figure 7.
the hollowed out high ceiled chamber of the man raised Quaker.\textsuperscript{23} I stand in the white rooms and I know that Turrell would understand my haunted basilica. I know, irritating and \textit{manifest destiny} as it all is, that Turrell understands walking out into the desert for seven years and living on the locusts and honey of stone and light and your own self looking back at you from the projector screen.

And yet, Turrell’s work doesn’t hate the body. In fact it needs the body. To know Turrell’s work you have to walk, and reach out to touch walls in the dark, and feel your feet on the ground as you sit on a wide meeting house bench. You have to have a body to see light, to know it from darkness, to understand color as it washes over your skin and transforms your clothes. Sitting before Turrell’s work the light doesn’t destroy the body. It connects it. Through the tectonic shift of color the body is linked to other bodies, to the floor, to the walls, to the building itself. Light fills the volume of its container, and takes you right along with it, until you are the meeting house, open to the sky. Until you are the basilica, sputtering back into wakefulness.

In closing I ask you this: What remains when you burn down a cathedral? What remains when purifying fire eats away the the nineteenth century facade cobbled on to the seventeenth century restoration of the thirteenth century blood and bones that was simply one of many Our Lady’s? After the antisemitic gargoyles have melted away what remains, dear advisor, is the sharp, soaring, medieval skeleton. The vaulted ceilings stand tall, the foundations sit heavy and at the end of the aisle, where thousands have walked before to make their gilded bloody offerings to Ecclesia, the sun shines through the ash to warm the bones buried in the altar.

\textsuperscript{23} For more on James Turrell’s Quaker influences, see Helen Meads, “The Quaker Meaning of Light (and James Turrell’s Work)”, \url{http://goinside togreetthelight.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Helen-Meads-Quaker-meaning-of-Light- -JT-work_.pdf}
Then, for better or for worse, you begin to build again. In that rebuilding to come, a thousand choices await.
Figure 3. Installation image of *The Scribe* by Margaret Hazel Wilson. Photograph by Leah Burke, April 29th, 2019.
Here is what I think: It was never meant for the work of nuns to be motherhood. The work of nuns was to farm, and pray, and sing, and write, and know. The work of nuns was to look upon works of art and see the living God beckon to them. The work of nuns was to scribe, and to gild, and to illuminate. One manuscript entered the convent and three left it. The work of nuns, the work of the convent, was not to mother but to conceive.\(^{24}\)

With that in mind, dear advisor, let me tell you this. I was in the twenty-seventh year of my age when I saw in a vision a writing desk and on the floor, a golden paten.\(^{25}\)

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\(^{24}\)This passage is based on my reading of Hildegard von Bingen’s theology of the Incarnation, as influenced by Sara Ritchey’s *Holy Matter*. To give an excerpt from my short paper which addressed Hildegard’s subtle distinction between the gendered bodies of virgin nuns and those of lay mothers and wives: “This period of [conception] seems a rich area of interest to Hildegard, for whom ‘the effect of the liturgy was to sing Christ’s presence into the womb of the cloister.’ More so than the gendered body of the individual nun, one could argue that Hildegard’s convent served as a kind of maternal body which carried the divine presence of Christ for the sake of the world. Constantly performing the liturgies which make Christ Incarnate on earth, Hildegard and her nuns were able to gestate divinity while remaining safe from the threats of rupture that plagued less spiritual mothers.”


\(^{25}\)“I was in the twenty-seventh year of my age” is a moment of poetic license taken from the conversion narrative of Gertrude the Great. “I was in the twenty-sixth year of my age when, on the Monday before the Feast of the Purification of Thy most chaste Mother…” Gertrude (which is incidentally my maternal grandmother’s name, another woman with a frighteningly genuine belief in Catholicism) was a nun in the convent at Helfta, and one of the great theologians of her time. I call upon her words because I feel a kinship with her experience, and with her conversion (though it is important to note the medieval coloring of “conversion” in this context, which to a contemporary reader would be better understood as her “spiritual awakening”). Again, I look to Petroff: “Although Gertrude was able to appreciate her good fortune in being brought to Helfta [as a child oblate], she was not always comfortable there. In her youth she found the convent a regio disimilitudinis, a ‘land of unlikeness,’ where she did not belong. …Both versions of her life imply that as a young woman she loved the life of the intellect far more than the life of the spirit. In fact, she says she paid no more attention to the interior of her life than the interior of her feet. …By her early twenties, she had become tense and melancholy. …She saw herself as a nun in appearance only, and she found her intellectual interests empty and unsatisfying. She was lonely with a consciousness of her singularity that reminds one of Heloise. Then, on January 27th 1281, just after her twenty-fifth birthday, Christ intervened.” The fulfillment that Gertrude the Great found in Christ after that point I would find in studying the art that fueled her visions. Both of our interests, I would venture to say, remained intellectual in flavor.

I understood the space in which I found myself to be a kind of chapel. There was a smooth white floor, a platform that stood slightly off the ground, and the ceilings were high. The bright light of day shone through open windows, and the sound of the air moving through the building hummed like breath or the negative space that follows the quieting of a church organ.

I approached the writing desk, which was also a table for kneading bread but stood unfloured. I found there type, as if for a strange printing press, arranged neatly in alphabetical order, with even a period and a comma waiting to be plucked from their stations. Stacked like unminted coins were rows and rows of wafers, white, with their subtle cross etched deep. They were only flour and water, and I even bit one to be sure. It crunched and then melted away on my tongue. But I was confused again, as I had been taught as a child that these wafers, this bread, was made of text. Was the Word. Then I touched one of the silver letters and my eyes were opened. I laid the piece of type, the bold letter “I” over one of the wafers and with the strength of my whole body I pressed down. The desk, the table, was built to my body, it allowed me my full force, and the letter was pressed into the bread.

Lifting the wafer from the table I freed the word-to-be from its impression with a delicate touch. The wafer gave beneath my fingers with a snap like a broken bone being reset. When the letter emerged I tipped it from its tin cutter and held the fragile sound in my hands as though it were a baby bird. The remnants of this process I swept away. They were only that: remnants, not relics.

26 A paten is a "eucharistic vessel in the form of a small shallow plate or disc of precious metal upon which the element of bread is offered to God at the Offertory of the Mass, and upon which the consecrated Host is again placed after the Fraction."
With the letter held between my finger and thumb I walked the short distance to the golden patent and there I placed the letter “I,” the first letter and the first sound and the first word of what I knew would be a lifelong manuscript. My white dress flowed behind me as I rose, returned to my desk, and continued in my work.

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I take a certain pleasure in making time spent evident in the final images I present.27 It is a deeply self-centered impulse, but it does mean something, in my opinion, to encounter an image and understand, for a moment, a sense of invested time stretching out into space. This is the one of the pleasures of viewing an illuminated manuscript, for example.28 There is an sense of many hours, compositing into a final image, like the beaded train on a couture gown. This is my preferred encounter with art both as maker and as a viewer. It is a contemplative enjoyment that I find in viewing works such as Ann Hamilton’s Still Life.29 The work is not strictly speaking time based, but I understand the accumulation of time as my eye moves from the figure, to the stacked shirts, and then to the walls. There is fourth dimension to the image, moving backwards in time, when I can imagine a nearly filmic unburning of each fabric edge, the peeling back of the gilding and the unsewing of labels. Perhaps this is for me an

27 I humbly admit that Robin Mandel was right, and that how my objects are made does matter. It matters deeply that in certain pieces I deliberately chose a method that would take a significant volume of time and meticulous action.
28 It is also, it is worth acknowledging here, one of the pleasures of being able to afford an illuminated manuscript, whether you are a religious institution or a wealthy secular patron. There is a dialogue to be had here concerning labor for which I am not prepared regarding the privileged status of being able to claim ownership over one’s own labor or the labor of others. My medieval background on this status quo stems from Michael Camille and his work on medieval patron Jean Duc de Berry.
29 See figures 8 and 9.
aesthetic manifestation of eschatological time.\textsuperscript{30} The rapturous image sits in majesty at the end of a long destined accumulation and synthesis of thought, time, and labor.\textsuperscript{31}

There is another sense of time, unlike that of the illuminated manuscript, which relates to my vision. This is a cyclical mode of time, the repeated construction of an image that will never be complete, that requires constant sustaining or the entire institution will crumble. I am referring to the time/space that centers on the altar, and the performance of the Catholic Eucharistic liturgy. There are dozens of minor ritual actions that must occur sequentially and consistently in order to result in the final image of the priest raising up the host and completing the Eucharistic liturgy. These actions more often than not do not originate in the priest, but in the person of the altar server. I can tell you there is a satisfaction in the performance of these ritual actions. They take on a time of their own, a cyclical sense of time that will never result in a finished manuscript, but rather allows the scribing (the performing) to become the accomplishment. It is an ongoing process that does not require a product. However, a meaningful embodiment of this ritual action requires a divorce from its origin, as the priest can only ever view his altar servers as hands which serve the overall goal of the final consecration, and thus the cementation of his own power as conduit to the divine. At least for a woman, participating in the ritual of the liturgy quickly grows stale unless a surrogate path to the divine can be found.

\textsuperscript{30} "Eschatological time" as I’m using it here refers to the linear Christian concept of time, which originates with the creation of the world by a higher power and follows a teleological course to a predetermined Final Judgement, or end times.

\textsuperscript{31} I might attribute my reading of \textit{Still Life} to my “Catholic imagination.” I was amazed viewing the red carpet, and even some of the exhibitions, of the 2018 Met Gala \textit{Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination}, how markedly this point was absent. It was revealed to me in viewing the papal garments on display in the Anna Wintour Costume Institute that the one element I could articulate that connects significant (medieval) Catholic art forms (manuscript production, embroidery, filigree metalworking, etc.) was \textit{contemplative labor}. 

It is interesting to be an altar server and a woman, because in the literal sense it’s the closest any of us get to priesthood. The altar server is essentially responsible for the mechanics of the liturgy as it is performed. We escort the celebrant into service, we fetch the water, wine, and bread for the consecration, we turn the pages of the book as the priest recites the rites and we witness, only a body space away, the moment of transubstantiation. I felt this powerful sense of control and priest-adjacency when I served, which was a regular occurrence between the ages of seven and eighteen. As it turns out, the likeness of the altar server to the priest is intentional, and is the reason it took until a ruling by Pope John Paul II to allow girls to serve at all. A query posed to Father Edward McNamara, professor of liturgy at the Regina Apostolorum Pontifical Athenaeum, serves to codify what I already knew in my bones standing on the altar every Sunday, though I never expected it to be expressed so baldly:

Q: What is the Church's position on the use of female altar servers? May all of the servers be female, or must at least one be male? Do you feel that the use of female altar servers detracts from the building of vocations among young males? — M.C.S.N., Catonsville, Maryland

A: Female altar servers are permitted in all but two U.S. dioceses. They are also common in most English-speaking countries, and in Western Europe. The situation is patchier in the rest of the world, going from total absence to the occasional diocese that allows them. From the point of view of liturgical law, an official interpretation of Canon 230, Paragraph 2, of the Code of Canon law on the possibility of delegating certain liturgical offices led to a 1994 letter from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments clarifying that girls may serve at the altar. But bishops are not bound to permit them to do so, nor could the episcopal conference limit the bishop's faculty to decide for himself. A further clarifying letter published in 2001 said priests are not compelled to have girls serve at the altar, even when their bishops grant permission. The 1994 letter states: "It will always be very appropriate to follow the noble tradition of having boys serve at the altar. As is well known, this has
led to a reassuring development of priestly vocations. Thus the obligation
to support such groups of altar boys will always continue.
Therefore the Holy See's recommendation is to retain as far as possible
the custom of having only boys as servers. But it leaves to the bishop the
choice of permitting women and girls for a good reason and to the pastor
of each parish the decision as to whether to act on the bishop's
permission.
It is important not to focus this debate using political categories such as
rights, equality, discrimination, etc., which only serves to fog the issue.
We are dealing with the privilege of serving in an act of worship to which
nobody has any inherent rights.\(^\text{32}\)

And one more quote from later in the same interview, because it so well expresses a
centuries old Catholic anxiety that it genuinely took my breath away to read it:

> When girls do serve, it is probably best to aim for a mixture of boys and girls — if only to avoid giving the impression to the congregation that Catholicism is above all a female activity.

I sit here, my hands hovering over the keyboard, dear advisor, at a momentary
loss for how to respond to these words. Maybe, and I am thinking of the burned
Beguines when I say this, the root of the issue may be that for better or for worse
Catholicism is above all a female activity. And what does it say that in the rectory office
somewhere a church secretary is muttering over the server’s schedule, trying to arrange
it to be visibly less so? And how does this inherently conflict with the purpose of altar
serving, which is apparently to develop the call to a priestly vocation\(^\text{33}\)?

\(^{32}\) Fr. Edward McNamara, in response to a question on “Female Altar Servers” in *A Zenit Daily Dispatch, EWTN*, Feb. 3rd, 2004. This is only an excerpt from his response. I have included the full response, and an included follow up, as an appendix to this paper (see Appendix B). I cannot stress enough the importance of this interview to the content of this piece, particularly as it relates to the (non)issue of female ordination.

\(^{33}\) The concept of “vocations” is one that I could not escape in my high school religion classes and now cannot find a single coherent scholarly source to summarize. Essentially, within the general context of a virtuous Catholic life, one is called by God to one of four “vocations”. The four vocations are the priesthood, religious life (monastic life), married life, or the single life. The process of discovering one’s vocation is a process of prayerful self-examination called discernment. It is central to this concept that vocations are not self-determined, but are decided by God. With this infallible declaration in place, it is conveniently not a matter of institutional decision making that women are not allowed to be ordained. Women, apparently, are not, nor
For context, it may be helpful to note that in my home parish where I served my ten years, the altar servers were certainly at least seventy percent female, from the eleven year old candle bearers up to and especially the teenage master servers. We were serving, performing the female activity of Catholicism in exactly the wrong way, because at the end of the journey there is nothing but the void of non-clerical status. I played priest for ten years. What exactly did this accomplish? It accomplished the events of the Mass, which without me and the other female altar servers would have been impossible. The priest would have been alone three weeks a month with no one to carry the cross, wash his hands, or ring the bell to sound the moment of the transformation of the bread to the body. Our labor was needed, and so we were allowed, but never to actually to access the path of vocation for which the system was created. I was merely a placeholder for the apathetic sons who didn’t feel like coming to Mass.

So in the course of ten years, I grew accustomed to the shape, sights, and sounds of the liturgy, in both body and mind. I now exist in the void that comes after, when the girls have been cast aside to either pursue more feminine vocations (the cloister, marriage, or the hushed and queer coded *single life*). In the absence of a priestly vocation available to me, I think in my mind’s eye I have begun to walk around the altar that I cannot fully remove from my spatial memory, the priestless one; the altar that is only my domain.

I have held the paten in my hands, always stacked with the chalice and the white altar cloth as handed to me by a priest, dirty dishes to be cleared away. Now I take it

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have they ever been, called to the priestly vocation. This is, of course, a fiction, and there are several active communities of excommunicated women priests over the world to contest it. Related to that topic, though they would never admit it, the Catholic Church is currently undergoing a “vocational crisis” as, shockingly the numbers of young men who want to become priests in recent decades has dropped sharply.

https://www.romancatholicwomenpriests.org/
from the altar. I turn it over, and feel the metal go flesh warm in my hands. I place it on the floor and stretch it to the size of a table, and that seems right. More space. More to see.

Next I approach the book. The Book which probably has an official title but I have yet to encounter its exact equivalent in medieval form so I guess I'll never know since these are the things they don't teach you in CCD. The book is the Gospels, but also the parts of the Mass, written in black and red ink and marked out with colorful ribbons which I had to know the order of, to turn the pages to the correct verse and chant and benediction as the priest needed them (orange, green, red, purple). Now I flip through, ignoring the ribbons. I want to see all of the text. I turn the pages, I read, until they tear. Then I tear them on purpose, ripping words apart until only fragments, single letters remain, scattering off the altar like moth wings.

Lastly, I approach the tabernacle. I pull out the hosts, consecrated, set aside from previous services, and I stack them on the altar like quarters. I go into the sacristy, and I pull out the hosts that are yet just bread, still in their packaging, and I add those as well (because they are the same). Then, standing behind the altar, my own altar, in my white vestments, I survey the pile of words that I have made (In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God\textsuperscript{34}). And from this mass, I begin to write something of my own. And that writing, that moment of conception, is above all a female activity.

What happens when you model priesthood, but there is no priest to become? I think, friends, that you become an author.

\textsuperscript{34} DRB John 1:1
EPILOGUE: SPEAKING IN DOUBT

Jesus Christ Superstar[^35^] Now there’s a journey into the desert. It’s Holy Saturday and I’m thinking on this movie. Remembering it. It was our Holy Saturday tradition, as a house of not quite genuinely religious Catholics who knew that when Christ was laying in the tomb you were supposed to stay home and do something subdued and quiet. It was my Holy Saturday tradition, glued to the screen after who can say how many repeat viewings, knowing somehow that this tremulous, glittering, gut-wrenchingly homoerotic thing that dripped blood and cried out in the desert was my actual birthright, not the never ending parade of anemic sermons I spent ignoring with my head buried in a missal. I think on Superstar, on my first taste of the smoke of aromatic spices on the high mountain, and I come to a better understanding of what medieval art has awoken in me.

There is a sacred cycle of images moving in and out of the body in the medieval mystic tradition. “The visions of female mystics and convent chronicles brim over with accounts of nuns standing before works of art, exchanging love vows with Christ, sharing embraces, kissing his wounds, and of course, receiving the stigmata.”[^36^] This brief description of the female monastic relationship to the Andachtsbilder, or devotional artwork (a troubled but illustrative category), by Jeffrey Hamburger demonstrates the cycle of movement. The mystic gazes upon the image, meditating on the content found within in. The image in turn, spurs the mystic to a visionary experience in which the

[^35^]: Jesus Christ Superstar is a 1973 film directed by Norman Jewison. To borrow the Turner Classic Movies synopsis: “Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's epic rock opera about the final days of Jesus Christ. The story follows Judas Iscariot as he questions his role in the rise of the Messiah.” The rock opera was filmed on location in Israel. A worthwhile anecdote: I can recall my grandfather telling me that when the movie was released, it was condemned widely as sacrilegious and that it was considered a thrill for young Catholics to sneak out and see it in theaters. Officially the Catholic Church condoned all forms of the rock opera in 1999. “Jesus Christ Superstar (1973): Brief Synopsis” Turner Classic Movies, accessed 4/20/19. [http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/79745/Jesus-Christ-Superstar/](http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/79745/Jesus-Christ-Superstar/)

image comes alive and interacts with her. This is the movement into the body (and mind and soul etc. etc.). The image then projects onto the mystic, changing her body in the form of the received stigmata (or various other corporeal manifestations), moving back from the internal to the external as a new image with the flesh of the mystic as a screen. The visionary and miraculous body experiences of the mystic then serve as images for others to gaze upon, and the cycle begins anew. The cycle is compounded by the mystics who record their images, by their own hand or through a scribe, or when those women and those who endorsed them then commissioned further works of devotional art spurred by the images they conceived. In between all this women were producing theology, political commentary, liturgical music, and erotic love poetry, all feeding into and pouring forth from the motion of images in and out of the body.

This has also been my process and it is how the process will continue. I am a screen, both reflective and discerning. As the images, from Superstar to D’Amiens to Turrell filter through, I build a greater and greater database of vision. And in this vision I continue to seek the answers to my life’s questions. I look for an answer to my petitions, as did the anchoress and visionary Julian of Norwich:

But despite this leading on, the wonder of the example never left me, for it seemed to me it had been given as an answer to my petition. And yet at that time I could not understand it fully or be comforted. ...The secrets of the revelation were deeply hidden in this mysterious example; and despite this I saw and understood that every showing is full of secrets. And

37 The stigmata (the five wounds of Christ received during the Crucifixion) are a discussion of image theory all their own. My brief foray here owes its baseline argument to Hans Belting and his article on the stigmata of Francis of Assisi. Also relevant is Thomas Lentes, and his article on active looking as an essential and formative element of medieval devotion. He says: “The inner [medieval] person was perceived as a place into which images that penetrated the external eye could be projected”.


therefore I must now tell of three attributes through which I have been somewhat consoled. The first is the beginning of the teaching which I understood from it at the time. The second is the inward instruction which I have understood from it since. The third is all the whole revelation from the beginning to the end, which our Lord God of his goodness freely and often brings before the eyes of my understanding. And these three are so unified, as I understand it, that I cannot and may not separate them.\footnote{Julian of Norwich, “Showings--Long Text” trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, in \textit{Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature}, ed. Elizabeth Petroff (New York and London:Oxford University press, 1986) 309.}

The work of this thesis has been to me what Julian’s vision was to her. It is images, perhaps even a narrative, that I have lived with, a narrative which has been full of secrets. I have translated these images as they move in and out of my body as best as I can with the help of Julian’s “three attributes”. First there were my encounters as a child, the jarring alternation between magic and myopia. I still carry those first sense memories and disappointments with me, which leads to the second kind of understanding, that of self-reflection. The “inward teaching” which allows me to revisit the past in new contexts, and find new iconographies within the worn picture bibles of my childhood. And lastly, there is the ever unfolding revelation. I don’t believe this comes from God but it is in a sense, cosmic music.\footnote{This metaphor is taken again from Hildegard von Bingen, as seen in the closing of her letter to Bernard of Clairvaux (see Appendix) “By the sacred sound through which all creation resounds…” This was one of Hildegard’s favored and unique pieces of imagery. As Atherton says in his introduction to her texts, “‘The sacred sound’ implies an idea of music as the essential fabric of the cosmos.” Mark Atherton, “Introduction,” in \textit{Selected Writings: Hildegard of Bingen}, trans. Mark Atherton (New York, Penguin Books, 2001) ix.} The revelation is knowledge that comes from others, the knowledge gained by moving in the world. Plenty of it is found within the academy; it is found in texts of those both living and dead, in classrooms and libraries. That to me is a particularly ecstatic kind of revelation, moving across time and space to hear the often chaotic but always passionate chorus of scholars participating in the ongoing project of
learning ourselves. But it also comes from our more interpersonal encounters, finding sameness and difference with friends, peers, and partners that change our understanding of the truths of the world in small ways with every conversation. Through this ongoing revelation I know that I am not like young Gertrude the Great, in a “land of unlikeness.” I was born into a Tradition, great and terrible, which has literally shaped me. But I have also been able to move outside of this tradition, and come to know truths about myself separate from that great empty basilica, even if I have never been able to leave its shadow. Moving forward my body, and my images, are going to turn back and shape that tradition in turn. We shall see what new architecture emerges when I’m finished.
Figure 4. Detail image of Confirmation by Margaret Hazel Wilson. Photograph by the artist, April 3rd, 2019.
Figure 5. *Chi Rho Page*. Book of Kells. Dublin, Trinity College, MS 58 fol. 34r.

http://annhamiltonstudio.com/projects/stillife.html

Venerable Father Bernard, you are held wonderfully in high honour by the power of God. You are a terror to the unlawful foolishness of the world; you burn in the love of God’s son; you are eager to win men for the banner of the Holy Cross to fight wars in the Christian army against the fury of the pagans. Father, I ask you, by the living God, to attend to my questions.

I am very concerned by this vision which has appeared to me in the spirit of mystery, for I have never seen it with the external eyes of the flesh. I who am miserable and more than miserable in my womanly existence have seen great wonders since I was a child. And my tongue could not express them, if God’s Spirit did not teach me to believe.

Most gentle Father, you are secure; in your goodness please answer me, your unworthy servant, for since I was a child I have never felt secure, not for a single hour! Could you search your soul, in your piety and wisdom, and discover how you are instructed by the Holy Spirit, and pour consolation upon me, your servant, from your heart?

For in the text I know the inner meaning of the exposition of the Psalter and the Gospel and other books shown to me in this vision, which touches my heart and soul like a consuming fire, teaching me these profundities of exposition. But it does not teach me writings in the German tongue—these I do not know—and I only know how to read for the simple meaning, not for any textual analysis. Give me an answer as to what you think, for I am a person ignorant of all teaching in external matters; I am taught inwardly in my soul. Therefore I speak as one in doubt.

Hearing of your wisdom and piety I am comforted. Because there is so much divisiveness in people I have not dared to speak of these things to any other person except for one monk—whom I have tested with regard to the integrity of his monastic life. I revealed all my secrets to him and he consoled me and convinced me that these are great secrets and things to be feared.

Father Bernard. I want you to reassure me, and then I will be certain! In a vision two years ago I saw you as a man able to stare at the sun without flinching, a courageous man. And I wept because I blush so much—because I am so timid! Good Father, through your kindness I have found a place in your soul, so that now, if you will, you can reveal to me through your word whether you want me to say these things openly or whether I should keep quiet. For I have great trouble with this visionary gift about how much I should say of what I have seen and heard. And sometimes, because I keep quiet, I am laid low by the vision and confined to my sickbed, unable to raise myself up. So I am sad, I lament before you: I am unstable with the movement of the wooden beam of the wine-press in my nature, the beam which grew at the prompting of the devil from
the root in Adam (for which he was cast out as a wanderer in this exile world). But now I raise myself up, I run to you, I speak to you. You are not unstable, you ease the pressure of the wooden beam, you gain the victory in your soul! And it is not only yourself alone: you raise up the whole world to salvation! You are the eagle staring at the sun!

And so I entreat you: by the brightness of the Father, by his wonderful Word, by the sweet humour of compunction, by the Spirit of Truth, by the sacred sound through which all creation resounds, by the Word from which all the world was created, by the height of the Father through the sweet power of green vigour sent the Word to the Virgin’s womb where it took on flesh like the honey in the honeycomb! May the sacred sound, the power of the Father, fall upon your heart and raise up your soul so that you are not passive and indifferent to the words of this correspondent, as long as you seek all things from God, from man or woman, or from the mystery, until you pass through the doorway in your soul and know these things in God.

Farewell. Be well in your soul, and strong in your certainty in God. Amen.


I, a mere woman, tell you this in the smoke of aromatic spices on the high mountain.


Who has written this book? I in my weakness have written it, because I dared not hide the gift that is in it.


I will not allow to be said in any way whatsoever a vulgar opinion of my understanding, merely because I do not know how to express it in ornate, well ordered words.


Hear, my lords, the words of Marie, who, when she has the opportunity, does not squander her talents.
APPENDIX B

ROME, 3 FEB. 2004 (ZENIT).
Answered by Father Edward McNamara, professor of liturgy at the Regina Apostolorum Pontifical Athenaeum.

Q: What is the Church's position on the use of female altar servers? May all of the servers be female, or must at least one be male? Do you feel that the use of female altar servers detracts from the building of vocations among young males? —M.C.S.N., Catonsville, Maryland

A: Female altar servers are permitted in all but two U.S. dioceses. They are also common in most English-speaking countries, and in Western Europe. The situation is patchier in the rest of the world, going from total absence to the occasional diocese that allows them.

From the point of view of liturgical law, an official interpretation of Canon 230, Paragraph 2, of the Code of Canon law on the possibility of delegating certain liturgical offices led to a 1994 letter from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments clarifying that girls may serve at the altar. But bishops are not bound to permit them to do so, nor could the episcopal conference limit the bishop's faculty to decide for himself.

A further clarifying letter published in 2001 said priests are not compelled to have girls serve at the altar, even when their bishops grant permission.

The 1994 letter states: "It will always be very appropriate to follow the noble tradition of having boys serve at the altar. As is well known, this has led to a reassuring development of priestly vocations. Thus the obligation to support such groups of altar boys will always continue."

The letter also recommends to bishops to consider "among other things the sensibilities of the faithful, the reasons which would motivate such permission and the different liturgical settings and congregations which gather for the Holy Mass."

Therefore the Holy See's recommendation is to retain as far as possible the custom of having only boys as servers. But it leaves to the bishop the choice of permitting women and girls for a good reason and to the pastor of each parish the decision as to whether to act on the bishop's permission.

It is important not to focus this debate using political categories such as rights, equality, discrimination, etc., which only serves to fog the issue. We are dealing with the privilege of serving in an act of worship to which nobody has any inherent rights.

The question should be framed as to what is best for the good of souls in each diocese and parish. It is thus an eminently pastoral and not an administrative decision, and this is why it should be determined at the local level.

Among the pastoral factors to be weighed is the obvious yet often forgotten fact that boys and girls are different and require different motivational and formative methods.
This difference means that both boys and girls usually go through a stage when they tend to avoid common activities. Preteen boys in particular are very attracted to activities that cater especially for them, and they tend to reject sharing activities with girls. They also tend to have a greater need for such structured activities than girls who are usually more mature and responsible at this stage of life. As a result, some parishes have found that the introduction of girl servers has led to a sharp drop-off of boys offering to serve. Once the boys have left and enter the years of puberty, it is difficult to bring them back.

Some pastors say this phenomenon is less marked where serving at Mass forms part of a wider Catholic structure, such as a school, or when siblings serve together. It is also true that groups of boy servers have fostered vocations to the priesthood. But to be fair, this usually happens within a broader culture of openness to a vocation in which other elements come into play, such as the example and spiritual guidance given by good priests, and family support.

If, for example, a long-established program of boy servers has proved successful in promoting vocations or has been useful in helping boys avoid bad company and maintain the state of grace, then the good of souls obliges pastors to weigh heavily the spiritual risks involved in abandoning it. When girls do serve, it is probably best to aim for a mixture of boys and girls — if only to avoid giving the impression to the congregation that Catholicism is above all a female activity. On some occasions, however, it might be best to separate boys and girls into different groups.

It is very difficult to lay down precise rules in a matter like this since the situation may vary widely between parishes. And it is not unknown to have sharp differences among the faithful who assist at different Masses at the same parish.

Follow-up: Female Altar Servers [from 02-17-04]

Regarding the column on female altar servers (Feb. 3), a priest from Illinois asked if it were possible to place the issue in a theological context. He suggests several arguments against their use and asks: "based on the same theology of the body that Pope John Paul II has so profoundly explained, how can girls serving at the altar not be perceived as a move towards women's ordination? The role of the altar server is not just functional. Also, actions speak louder than words; by the Pope allowing altar girls in the context of the cultural politicization of the liturgy and the role of women, he does send the message that women's ordination will come about despite statements to the contrary."

Personally I do not think it is wise to try to establish doctrinal grounds for every aspect of liturgical discipline. The very fact that the Holy Father approved of this change clearly shows that he does not consider this issue to have serious doctrinal implications. While our correspondent is correct in saying that the role of altar servers is not merely functional, I think it is necessary to distinguish between minister, either ordained (bishop,
priest and deacon) or instituted (acolyte and lector) and those who may be delegated in
some cases to substitute for them.
Thus the formal ministries of the Church are open only to males, while altar servers,
readers and extraordinary ministers of Communion, whose function is to substitute for
the lack of proper ministers, may be delegated to Catholics of either sex.
Even when these functions are carried out frequently, or even daily, they will always be
especially delegated and substitutive. In this context the canonical decision to open
service at the altar to girls was logical since every other delegated ministry had already
been opened up.
This is certainly a break with a very long-standing custom of having only males serve at
the altar even in substitutive roles. But it does not appear to be an issue of doctrine.
Nor does the Holy Father's decision open the way toward women's ordination. The papal
declaration in "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis" that the Church has no power to ordain women is
no mere statement of opinion but, as confirmed by the Congregation for the Doctrine of
the Faith, an exercise of the gift of infallibility and therefore binding.
Another reader, also from Illinois, asked if there were any norms regarding adults serving
at Mass.
All instituted ministers (acolytes and lectors) are adult men, most of whom receive these
ministries in their early 20s. Adult servers are very common all over the world especially
in daily Masses or very early Sunday celebrations.
One or two female readers took exception to my comments that this debate should not
use political categories such as rights, equality and discrimination.
One correspondent from Boston writes: "Since when have human rights and human
equality become a 'political category.' Any brief survey of Church documents would
reveal that such rights and equality are part of morality. Too frequently, it sounds as if
the Church doesn't have to worry about breaking the moral law because it follows a
higher liturgical law. Also, the last time I checked, by virtue of baptism, the Code of
Canon Law says that every Catholic has a right to the sacraments. Does liturgical law
also override canon law?"
Perhaps my choice of examples might have been better, but I think our correspondent
read too much into my words.
She is totally correct, of course, in suggesting that rights, above all human rights, are
essentially rooted in morality and thus should be beyond politics. I would also observe
that there are other classes of rights less closely tied up to morality, such as the right to
vote at 18 instead of 21.
At the same time, many of these rights have a political dimension and in this way are
also political categories.
The social equality of women, for example, was not caused by a sudden surge of male
morality sweeping away all discriminatory laws. Rather, it was eked and pried out by
dogged, determined and sometimes heroic political action by women themselves.
Likewise, who can deny that the supposedly unalienable right to life has not tragically
become the stuff of political activity?
Getting back to our subject, while the rights enjoyed by every Catholic are spelled out clearly by canon law, and include among other entitlements a right to the sacraments (see Canon 214), which is certainly not political, this fact has little to do with the question of a "right" to serve at the altar.
Serving at Mass, unlike the Catholic's right to assist at Mass and receive Communion, is a privilege and in some cases a vocation. But it can never be called a right. Therefore, I repeat that no one has a right to do so and to frame the question in these terms is to use political categories to seek to demand what can only be humbly accepted.
Finally, a reader from Kenya suggested that St. Margaret Clitherow could complement St. John Berchmans as patron of altar servers. This English wife and mother was martyred in 1586 because she kept the forbidden vestments, chalices, books and bread in her home and arranged that priests could secretly celebrate Mass there. It is an interesting suggestion and may prosper. ZE04021720
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ARTIST AT WORK