



Foreword to Joanna Manning, *Is the Pope Catholic? A Woman Confronts her Church*
(Malcolm Lester Books, 1999)

By Ched Myers

There is an old Bible story about King Josiah of Judah, who is told of “a book of the Law” that has been discovered in the basement of the Temple (2 Kings 22). The king summons all his advisors to interpret the meaning of this book. But these luminaries turn immediately for help to an obscure figure: Huldah, the wife of a “keeper of the wardrobe.” This mysterious woman is, however, a prophet, and it is *she* who interprets the meaning of the lost book to the king. Her reading represents a hard word of judgment upon the community’s apostasy, yet promises renewal if the leadership has the courage and vision to repent. Scholars believe this old story refers to the “appearance” of the book of Deuteronomy that launched the Josianic reform, a major turning point in the history of Israel.

Joanna Manning is a kind of Huldah-figure for today. Her re-reading of the Church’s tradition offers a hard word of judgment and a hopeful word of reformation. It is long past time for our clerical aristocracies to again turn to the wisdom, truth-telling and passion of women prophets. Developments in the summer of 1998 demonstrate the timeliness and urgency of this book. At the end of June the Pope announced new Church laws to punish those who disagree with the Vatican’s interpretation of what are definitive teachings, including the ban on women’s ordination. In late July the Vatican ruled that one bishop’s dissenting vote can prevent an action by a national bishop’s conference *until reviewed by the Vatican*. And in late August, as I write this Forward, Fr. Jim Callan of Corpus Christi parish in Rochester, New York has been informed by his bishop that he is being reassigned, due to pressure from the Vatican.

Jim Callan has been the sole priest in an inner-city parish for more than 20 years, and has embodied the meaning of renewal. Having inherited a dying congregation, a huge, crumbling infrastructure and a financial disaster, he has presided over a remarkable renaissance. Today Corpus Christi has eight major ministries operated for – and in many cases by – ex prisoners, the homeless, recovering addicts, children, and hospice patients. The parish is a hive of community activity, staffed by dozens of lay people. Callan’s title was “Administrator,” while church bulletins and letterhead state simply that the pastor of the church is Jesus Christ. Each of the five weekend masses (including a Spanish *misa* and a black gospel mass) is attended by as many as a thousand parishioners; on Thursdays there is also a Folk Mass at the church and a Workers Mass at a downtown office building. Parishioners include the mentally and physically disabled, gays and lesbians and not a few Protestants. But perhaps most impressive – and most troubling to the Vatican – is the fact that co-

presiding at the altar, in full vestment, is Corpus Christi's Associate Pastor, Mary Ramerman, a laywoman.

I see Jim and Mary, along with their many collaborators at Corpus Christi, as exemplary of the contemporary struggle for the future of the church. As an ecumenical theologian and activist committed to building a faith-based peace and justice movement, I travel around North America a great deal, conducting teaching missions with parishes, small groups, communities and organizations. Nowhere have I been more deeply impressed by the spirit of the gospel reflected in real life than at Corpus. So while as a Protestant I may find it hard to get overly excited about Vatican *pronuncimientos*, the news of Jim's silencing hits me hard. I am furious that the animator and conspirator of such a true sign of ecclesial hope and compassion is being targeted by distant clerics in a desperate attempt to control the winds of the Spirit that are blowing through our churches. The losers in this punitive reaction are the poor, laypeople and women. And these groups, as Joanna Manning rightly argues in the final chapter of this book, represent the core constituency upon which the renewal of the church depends.

The frustrating scenario at Corpus Christi, so regrettably familiar under the pontificate of John Paul II, contributes to the growing crisis facing the Roman Catholic Church. It is this crisis that is directly addressed in this book. I met Joanna in 1992 at a retreat I led for a Catholic mission agency in Toronto on the Columbus Quincentenary. She and I, though from very different backgrounds, immediately sensed that we were kindred spirits: sold out to the gospel vision of justice, committed to discovering faith through solidarity with the poor, equally committed to laughing and dancing, and loyally critical of our respective church traditions. We have crossed paths many times since then, always encouraging one another in our respective work. I have a keen sense of how much the writing of this book has (and will) cost her, both personally and professionally.



Joanna's fascinating spiritual pilgrimage (outlined in Chapter One) makes it clear that she is a true daughter of the Roman Church. A true prophet loves her people enough to speak difficult and controversial truth, and Joanna's love for her tradition is manifested by the labor of this book. To be sure, it has an "edge" – what prophetic discourse doesn't? Joanna (*left*) speaks frankly of a "delusional system" and "spiritual fascism," of the duplicity of a Church that would champion human rights and women's equality in the world but not in its own institutional life. But the integrity of her polemic is anchored by three characteristics.

First, these pages are grounded in serious theological reflection: Joanna has picked a philosophical fight with the Vatican, pleading for fidelity to what she argues are the true "orthodox" traditions of the Church.

Second, her position is rooted in historical literacy: she contends that the active and committed laity of the Church has always managed, over time, to prevail over clerical error. Third, her writing is authenticated by genuine experience and praxis.

What drives Joanna Manning is the suffering and indignity of real women and other marginalized persons and groups in the church and world, many of whose stories have been woven throughout the tapestry of this book. Joanna embodies the church she dreams of: she has opened her home and her life to the poor at Anne Frank House; she advocates for the vulnerable in society as well as within the Church, as evidenced by her recent engagements with the Ontario Provincial Government; she listens as passionately as she teaches, whether it is to students or street people; and she always takes time out for prayer and for a party.

For all these reasons, Joanna is a treasure of the Canadian Church. I pray especially that those whose stations are directly challenged by this book can find the grace to receive it as the gift it is. Moreover, it is my hope that this book will be read by men as well as women, by non-Catholics as well as Catholics, by contemplatives as well as activists. I believe that the only future open to *any* of our churches is one characterized by ecumenicity, lay leadership, and equality. This future is already being realized, however tentatively, all over the world among Christians of all types who work for peace and justice. Joanna, good prophet that she is, invites us to have “eyes to see” that future now. May we have “ears to hear.”