Opinion
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Of all the liturgical seasons, Advent is my favorite. It is a time of deep stillness and expectant waiting. It is a time of prophetic promise. On the second Sunday of Advent, Isaiah tells us the wolf will be the guest of the lamb, the lion and calf browse together, and a descendent of Jesse — in Christian faith, Jesus — will judge the poor with justice. Filled with the spirit of wisdom, he leads the people in "knowledge of the Lord" so there "shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain" (Isaiah 11:1-10).

I love this quintessentially Advent text because it is painfully obvious that harm and ruin are running rampant in our world today. I suspect I am not alone in getting mad when things aren't the way they should be, whether in the macro world we all inhabit, or in each of our micro worlds. It is perhaps easier to feel discouraged and hopeless than to accept that life comes with both suffering and joy, with both beauty and ugliness. Advent calls us to a deeper faith in Jesus' power to reconcile these lion-lamb opposites.

A quote from bestselling author Mark Nepo's Surviving Storms seems especially apropos:

> *The great challenge of our time is how to let in both the beauty and devastation that meet us every day without wasting our life energy running from one to the other. The real work is opening our heart wide enough and deep enough to receive both, so that we can draw strength from the miracle of life to repair the tragedy of life.*

But is it even possible to let in both beauty and devastation? I know I could not open my heart wide and deep enough to receive these wrenching realities were it not for the Christ-love already at work within. This wondrous Christ-love brings courage to receive and strength to repair the wounds and tragedies of my life. Nepo challenges

us to not waste energy lamenting. Sometimes the most necessary thing is to accept what is and then focus on what must be done. He goes on to observe: "This deeper practice is crucial to how we survive storms. … Often, the storms of life upend us without notice. Yet, like it or not, storms are also agents of transformation."

Which brings me to my transforming-challenge for this Advent, 2022.

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In a recent interview, America magazine executive editor Kerry Weber asked Pope Francis, "What would you say to a woman who is already serving in the life of the church, but who still feels called to be a priest?" Francis replied with a rather convoluted description of "two theological principles" at work. The "Petrine principle" he said, "is that of ministry" in the church. The second "Marian principle" — the theology of which Francis acknowledged has yet to be developed—reflects that "the church is woman. The church is a spouse."

In what some social media wags humorously described as "popesplaining," Francis ended with a rhetorical question and a confusing answer: “And why can a woman not enter ordained ministry? It is because the Petrine principle has no place for that. Yes, one has to be in the Marian principle, which is more important. Woman is more, she looks more like the church, which is mother and spouse."

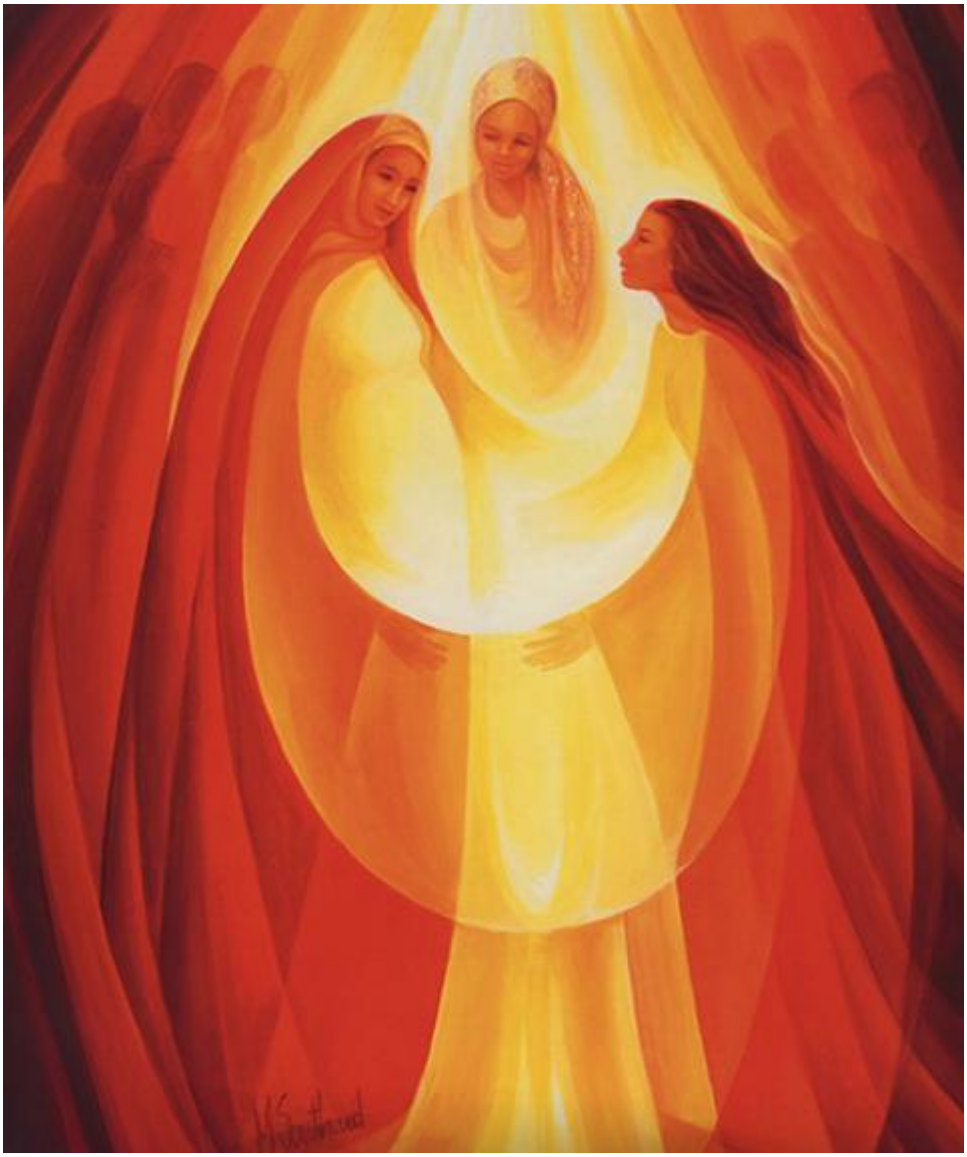
Please note. I am — and have long been — one of Pope Francis' biggest fans. He has reformed Vatican financial systems, promoted more women to high-ranking curial positions than any pope in history, reached out pastorally to LGBTQ Catholics and is even now working to empower lay voices via the synod on synodality. But he — and many like him — are regrettably blind on the issue of whom the Holy Spirit may be calling to ordained ministry.

It is reductive to say ministry belongs only to the "Petrine" theological principle. As defined, this principle restricts ministry to male clerics. In fact there are many more laypersons — both male and female — ministering in the church than ordained persons. Even if we grant this dubious theological premise, I long to complicate our

good pope's thinking about the "Marian principle," which he himself acknowledges is theologically undeveloped.

> But he — and many like him — are regrettably blind on the issue of whom the Holy Spirit may be calling to ordained ministry.
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In addition to Advent's focus on prophetic hope, this season is a time to focus on Mary the mother of Jesus. On Dec. 8 we celebrate Mary who was filled with grace from the moment she came into being. The Dec. 12 feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe celebrates the astonishing 1531 appearance of a young mestizo woman dressed in Aztec royal garments who introduced herself to Juan Diego in his native Nahuatl language as "the mother of the one true God for whom one lives." Scholars tell us the holy woman of Guadalupe gave birth to modern Mexico with its fusion of Indian and Spanish cultures. Theologian and St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson has observed, "The figure of Guadalupe is a living locus of female imagery of the divine."



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On Dec. 21 and 22 we read of Mary and Elizabeth, who in their loving support of one another, first embody the church. At that moment only these two humble women contain within themselves the joyous knowledge that God's new moment of salvation is about to be born in the person of Jesus. Elizabeth blesses Mary's belief that God's promise to her would be fulfilled. Mary responds by echoing Hannah's revolutionary prayer praising a God who casts the mighty from their throne and raises up the lowly (Luke 1:39-56).

Are these perhaps the threads of a "Marian principle" that Pope Francis seeks to bring to theological fulfillment in the church? If so, he had best be careful what he asks for. It looks as if the "Marian principle" is filled with grace, images the divine and evokes a God who casts the mighty from their thrones. Recent history suggests "the mighty" in the church are not exempt.

Ministry in the church — which Francis apparently equates to sacramental ministry — does not belong only to the "Petrine principle." On Dec. 25 we celebrate the birth of Jesus. We celebrate the moment when the woman, Mary, brought forth Christ's body and blood from her own body. Is anyone more qualified to celebrate Eucharist than the woman who first said, "This is my body. This is my blood"? The "Marian principle" Francis mentions does not exclude women called to priestly, sacramental ministry.

This is the Advent transformation for which I pray. It is one I believe the Spirit of God is even now laboring to bring to birth.

This Advent prayer-poem I wrote a while ago is an attempt to embrace the beauty and repair the devastation so many are experiencing in our church. Perhaps it can help us to, in Nepo's words, "draw strength from the miracle of life to repair the tragedy of life":

Advent

I wait

with quickened hope

for crooked paths

to straighten,

with tough-soul'd

anguish

while blinded

keepers of the keys

shut out

God's own.

(If such a thing

were possible).

I wait,

and will not be

dismayed.

For tiny shoot

of Jesse tree

took root in me

to love

transform,

give sight,

set free.

—Christine Schenk, CSJ, 10/17/03