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The women who helped shape Christianity

As the Church of England votes on whether to allow female bishops here are 11 female role models—from the Virgin Mary to a female Pope—in Church history



Mary Magdalene is just one of the holy woman throughout the history of Christianity Photo: ALAMY

By Peter Stanford

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1 and 2: The Holy Marys

Christianity is very fond of its role models, and in the Virgin Mary, Jesus' mother, and Mary Magdalene, the repentant sinner, it offers two from either end of the spectrum. The first is blameless, pure, accepting, never complaining (save in Colm Toibin's recent Booker short-listed novel, *The Testament of Mary*) and, throughout the gospel, happy to leave the chaps to get on with it. The second is said to be a fallen woman (though the gospels are vague on this, describing her as having been possessed by seven demons) and has come, in Christian imagery, to represent both the wickedness of sexual desire and how that can be conquered by faith. And it is she, not the men, who in John's gospel first sees the risen Lord, making her arguably the first Christian.



3: Theodora Episcopa

Fifth century mosaics in the ancient church of Saint Prassede in Rome, standing on the site of one of the meeting places of the first Christians in the city, include a striking image of four women. In the mosaic, one is described as “Theodora Episcopa” or “Theodora, the woman bishop”. Official Catholicism prefers to translate this as “Theodora, the bishop’s wife”, since married priests were the norm until the twelfth century, but campaigners for women’s ordination claim this as evidence that women held a much more prominent role in the early church than is now admitted.

4. Hilda of Whitby (614–80)

The great niece of a king, Hilda was part of the great tradition of Celtic monasticism which spread from Ireland, via Iona in Scotland, to the “new” Christian lands of England. In 657 she founded and ran a monastery on the banks of the River Wear, with separate houses for men and women, a not uncommon arrangement for the times, though later abandoned as the church became ever more male. Her reputation as a teacher led to the holding of the first synod of the English Church at Whitby in 664.

5. Pope Joan (853-55)

The She-Pope’s story is rubbished by the Vatican but is recorded by some 500 chroniclers of the papacy from the twelfth century until the end of the seventeenth century. The authors include several papal servants and bishops, but none is an eyewitness. Joan is said to have been a bright, young German woman, who disguised herself as a monk to continue her education, but was so successful that she had attracted the patronage of Pope Leo IV, and was

elected his successor as Pope John. Her true gender was discovered only when she gave birth in the street in Rome during a papal procession. The accounts variously describe her as being stoned to death, along with her baby, or tied to the legs of a horse and dragged through the street until dead.

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6. Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)

This remarkable German polymath gave her life to the church from the age of eight, going on to found a monastery for women at Bingen on the Rhine. Freed of the control of men, this all-female environment proved to be a hothouse for encouraging excellence in all areas of work. Hildegard wrote poems, theology and medical and botanical tracts, and composed music that is still played and admired to this day.



7. Elizabeth of Hungary (1207–31)

One of the very few female saints to have been married and had children, Elizabeth was a king's daughter who was betrothed at the age of four. As an adult, she began doing charitable works, inspired by her faith. On the death of her husband, when she was 20, she resisted all attempts to force her to remarry, and became a lay Franciscan, founding a hospital for the poor and sick. So devout was she that she was reputed on occasion to share her bed with a female leper to make reparation for her own sins of pride.

8. Mary Ward (1585–1645)

A pioneering educationalist and the English founder of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, today known as the Congregation of Jesus, she was regarded in her day as far too radical for a mere woman. She tried out at an enclosed convent but preferred running a school for rich and poor girls in Saint Omer in France. Her efforts to found an order of teaching nuns, out and about in the world, were judged dangerous and her Institute was suppressed by the papacy in 1630, only reviving 73 years later and growing into a global force in educating young women worldwide.



9. Therese of Lisieux (1873–97)

“The Little Flower”, this French Carmelite focussed on the importance of small acts of kindness. “Great deeds are forbidden me,” she wrote. “The only way I can prove my love is by scattering flowers, and these flowers are every little sacrifice, every glance and word, and the doing of the least actions for love.” She suffered ill health throughout her life, which she bore gladly, dying at the age of 24. After her death, her spiritual journal, *The Story of a Soul* became a bestseller, and her relics (bits of her bones) continue to travel the world, including Britain in 2009, in a medieval spectacle that draws huge crowds.



Relics of St Therese of Lisieux at Westminster Abbey

10. Blessed Teresa (1910-97)

The former Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who died in 1997, was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 2002, leaving her just one step short of sainthood. An Albanian nun, who trained as a teacher in Ireland, she was based in India from 1929, where she experienced a call to serve the poorest of the poor – “people who have become a burden to society and are shunned by everyone”. She founded her Missionaries of Charity order in 1950 – now 4,000 strong, in 130 countries, with its distinctive white and blue robes. Critics suggested she promoted outdated notions of charity rather than justice and was too close to dictators (the late Christopher Hitchens attacked her in a book, *The Missionary Position*), but in 1979 she received the Nobel Peace Prize.



11. Katharine Jefferts Schori (1954-)

Raised as a Roman Catholic, Jefferts Schori became in 2006 the first female primate (head) of one of the branches of the worldwide Anglican Communion, of which the Church of England is a member. She is Presiding Bishop of the Episcopalian Church in the US, where her appointment has caused near schism. Unusually for a Christian leader, she supports abortion rights for women.



12. Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger (1956-)

This unassuming Austrian ex-nun and school teacher, who looks like Margaret Becket, was excommunicated by the Catholic Church in 2002 after she and a group of other Catholic women announced they had been ordained as priests by a retired bishop, in good standing with Rome, on a boat in the middle of the Danube. “The Danube Seven” have inspired at least 100 other women to follow suit, and in 2003 Mayr-Lumetzberger took it one stage further by being consecrated a bishop (by another bishop, who she refuses to name lest he be disciplined by the Vatican). In her native Austria and Germany, she says, she is often welcomed onto the altar at churches and abbeys to say mass and conduct weddings and funerals.