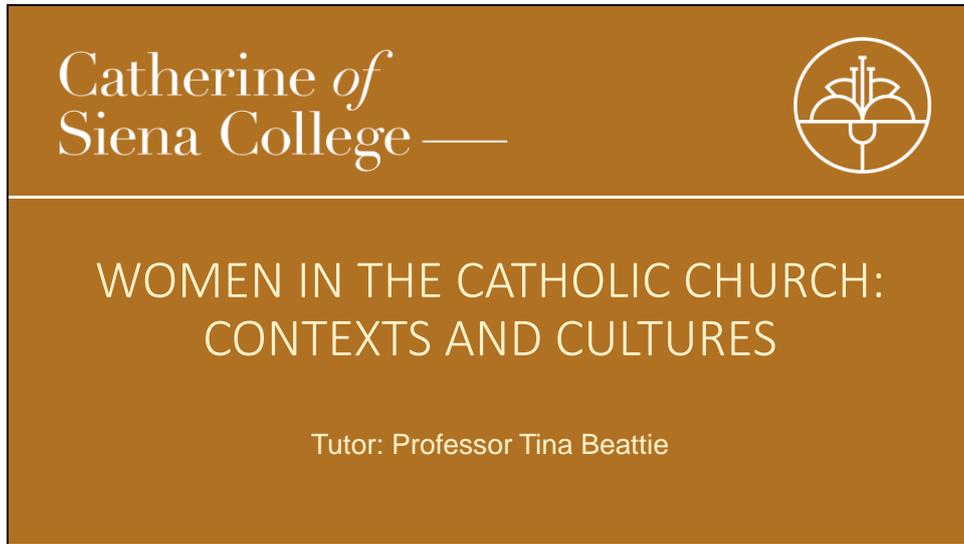


WOMEN IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: CONTEXTS AND CULTURES  
TRANSCRIPT OF LECTURE – WEEK 5

Slide 1



Catherine of  
Siena College —

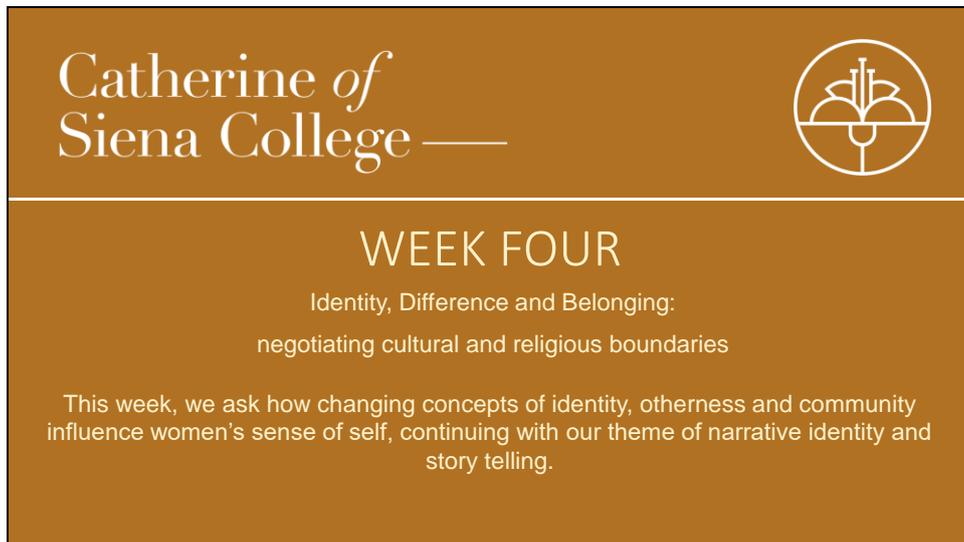


WOMEN IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH:  
CONTEXTS AND CULTURES

Tutor: Professor Tina Beattie

Welcome to week five of this Catherine of Siena course – “Women in the Catholic Church – Contexts and Cultures”, and once again this is Tina Beattie taking you through this session.

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Siena College —



WEEK FOUR

Identity, Difference and Belonging:  
negotiating cultural and religious boundaries

This week, we ask how changing concepts of identity, otherness and community influence women’s sense of self, continuing with our theme of narrative identity and story telling.

So far, we have considered questions of identity, community and meaning in generic terms, using “woman” in a way that implies conformity to normative concepts of womanhood and personhood in any given culture, while respecting that these norms vary from culture to culture and context to context. Now we’re considering how these issues become more complex and fluid when they intersect with other markers of identity and/or conflicting cultural contexts.

There are a number of essays in the book that address these issues, and you should feel free to select whichever of these most interest you. You will find some suggestions in Moodle. In this lecture, we focus on women who have to navigate cultural and religious conflicts in the formation of their identities and in their quest for a sense of meaning and vocation. For some

this entails experiences of conversion and personal transformation, for others it constitutes a struggle for meaning and survival on the margins of society.

We ask what we can learn from their stories, in an era when many people find themselves in similar positions of ambiguity, conflict and complexity.

Slide 3

## PART ONE

### CHALLENGING CULTURES

Anna Kasafi Perkins writes about her life as a Catholic (“flatalik”) woman in the context of Jamaica’s Rastafarian culture. In her filmed interview she speaks more about this and about the various ways in which she feels called to work for change within that community. Please watch the video on Moodle and read the article in the book: “Confessions of a Jamaican ‘Flatalik’”.



The first story we engage with this week is that of Anna Kasafi Perkins – a young Jamaican theologian who tells of how she has shaped her Catholic identity and her sense of vocation through a process of conflict and creative engagement with Rastafarian culture. You can find a link to her interview in the Moodle site for this week, and her essay is in the PDF of the book. Please take time to engage with both of these, and then consider the questions in the next slide.

Slide 4

## LIVING AT THE INTERSECTIONS

### Anna Kasafi Perkins

- Historical influences
- Religious tensions and conflicts
- Social justice
- Popular culture
- Gender and female sexuality



Anna offers us an opportunity to understand what is meant by “intersectionality”. This refers to the recognition that, in our postcolonial and multicultural world, our identities are woven together by complex and often conflicting claims arising from different cultural, religious and social contexts. Gender and sexuality are part of this, so that what it means to be a Catholic

woman lends itself to many different ways of interpreting and giving meaning to our experiences.

Anna invites reflection on the extent to which narrative identities encompass all of the following:

- Historical influences – in her case, western imperialism and its legacy of racism, and the postcolonial assertion of human dignity through the imaginative creation of a distinctive culture woven together by historical memory and the quest for a shared identity.
- Religious tensions and conflicts – Rastafarianism and Catholicism as two very different forms of religious expression emerging from one Christian story, again influenced by colonial and postcolonial discourses.
- Social justice – Anna expresses the desire to serve the poor and to challenge misogyny and homophobia.
- Popular culture – Jamaican popular music and its influences, including the need to challenge sexist and homophobic lyrics.
- Gender and female sexuality – Anna speaks about the various ways in which misogynistic attitudes influence the representation of female sexuality

Spend some time reflecting on what Anna’s story can teach us about the formation of identity in the face of different cultural and religious challenges. Do you resonate with some of these challenges in terms of your own experience and identity, or do you draw on a more singular and homogenous historical and cultural narrative in understanding who you are and who you are called to be?

You might like to make some notes in your journal, to enable you to come back and reflect on these questions.

Slide 5

## PART TWO CHANGING CULTURES

We ask what happens when religious conflict or conversion leads a person to inhabit a different narrative and to change the ways in which she understands herself and her place in the world.

For many people today, situations of violence, persecution, war and poverty lead them to become refugees and to live through experiences of profound change in their identities and vocations. Mishal Francis is one such person. You can find her essay in the book: “Fire in my Heart: A Young Pakistani Woman Discovers Her Vocation”. The video interview with her is also on Moodle.



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## LIVING AT THE CROSSROADS

### Mishal Francis

- Religious persecution and refuge
- Vocation and transformation
- Changing cultures and discovering identities



Mishal tells a story of fleeing from religious persecution and discovering her vocation to work with young people. Her story reminds us of some of the challenges of seeking peace and reconciliation in a violent and conflicted world. She also reminds us that many Christians around the world today face persecution for their faith.

So she asks us to reflect on religious persecution and refuge, vocation and transformation, and changing cultures and discovering identities.

You might like to consider Mishal’s story in terms of narrative identity, culture and religion. Her experiences are very different from Anna’s. What are the similarities and differences between them? What role does their Catholic faith play in offering points of commonality and shared experience between them?

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## LIVING AT THE CROSSROADS

### Irim Sarwar

- Religious conversion
- Domestic and cultural influences
- Feminist challenges to religious identities



Irim Sarwar presents yet another example of religions and cultures in dialogue and conflict in the story of her conversion from Islam to Catholicism.

Particularly, she offers us perspectives on the meaning of religious conversion, on domestic and cultural influences on who we are, and on feminist challenges to religious identities.

You might like to consider Irim's story in the book and ask questions such as:

- What does she tell us of the experience of religious conversion?
- What can we learn from Mishal and Irim about the ways in which domestic and cultural contexts influence our religious identities and decisions?
- What does Irim's experience teach us about the influence of feminist consciousness on religious identity and experience?
- What comparisons and contrasts would you make between Anna, Mishal and Irim?
- What do these stories tell us about the diversity of experiences, visions and identities among Catholic women?

Again, this might be time to pause to make some notes, and to join the discussion forum.

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### PART THREE

## THE SOUL IN SEARCH OF A SELF

“Who am I and who am I called to become?”

We consider this question in the light of women's stories told from three different perspectives:

- Those who experience a sense of futility and suicidal despair
- Those living with intellectual disabilities
- Those who are transgender or transsexual women



Even more challenging than these stories so far perhaps, is the question of what happens when a person can't find meaning in her culture or religion when the symbols and narratives that create a sense of self are lacking – when her way of being puts her outside all the conventions and identities that are available to others as they seek to understand the meaning and purpose of their lives.

We consider those who ask “Who am I and who am I called to become?” in three different contexts:

- Women who live with intellectual disabilities
- Women who experience a sense of futility and suicidal despair
- Transgender or transsexual women

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**THE SOUL IN SEARCH OF A SELF**  
Johanna Greeve, Cristina Gangemi, Samantha Tillman

- Stories of social and religious exclusion
- Souls in search of meaning and identity
- What happens when the symbols and narratives fail?



I call this section “The soul in search of a self”, and we look at three stories in the book – by Johanna Greeve, by Cristina Gangemi and by Samantha Tillman. These are stories of social and religious exclusion, of souls in search of meaning and identity. They ask us to reflect on what happens when the symbols and narratives fail?

We already considered Gertrude Jusufu’s story in the first week and that would form part of this reflection, but hers is only one of several accounts of exclusion and marginalisation in the book. These all take different forms, depending on the causes for exclusion and the social or religious prejudices that a woman has to struggle against.

Please consider these women’s stories and the circumstances that led to their experiences of rejection or alienation.

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**LIVING IN EXTRA TIME: A JOURNEY FROM DESPAIR TO HOPE**  
Johanna Greeve

“When I was only a toddler, I already felt something odd in my head. My brain felt like an overheated motor, and I was concerned about it, as young as I was. ...  
School was an alienating place for me. I did not have the ability to comprehend other children, let alone adults. My brain worked overtime, and I suffered social stress, as I was trying and only half-succeeding to fit in.  
What made matters worse was my difficulty in believing in God. ...  
That was bad, because I needed God as a fixed orientation point, and as a source of consolation.”



Let’s look at Johanna Greeve’s story in “Living in Extra Time: A Journey from Despair to Hope”.

Throughout this course so far, we have been thinking in terms of women as story tellers – women who acquire narrative identities by the creative appropriation and refiguration of the cultural and religious meanings available to them in the context of their Catholic faith, but what about those outside all these points of reference?

Johanna says:

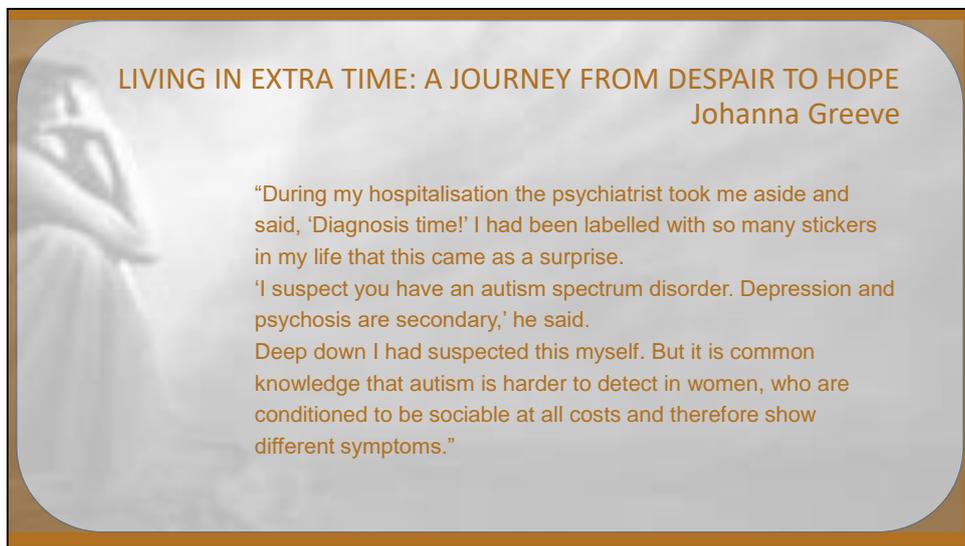
*When I was only a toddler, I already felt something odd in my head. My brain felt like an overheated motor, and I was concerned about it, as young as I was. ... School was an alienating place for me. I did not have the ability to comprehend other children, let alone adults. My brain worked overtime, and I suffered social stress, as I was trying and only half- succeeding to fit in.*

*What made matters worse was my difficulty in believing in God. ... That was bad, because I needed God as a fixed orientation point, and as a source of consolation.*

Please read Johanna’s story and think about how she describes what it means to be living with autism, particularly in the years before her condition was finally diagnosed. Her story invites reflection on the sense of abandonment a person can feel when they are unable to inhabit the narratives and meanings available to them – the sense of stress, alienation and not fitting in, with a need for “a fixed orientation point” associated with the ability to believe in God.

What does Johanna’s story tell us about the search for meaning and the adequacy or inadequacy of our cultural and religious narratives to respond to that search?

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**LIVING IN EXTRA TIME: A JOURNEY FROM DESPAIR TO HOPE**  
Johanna Greeve

*“During my hospitalisation the psychiatrist took me aside and said, ‘Diagnosis time!’ I had been labelled with so many stickers in my life that this came as a surprise. ‘I suspect you have an autism spectrum disorder. Depression and psychosis are secondary,’ he said. Deep down I had suspected this myself. But it is common knowledge that autism is harder to detect in women, who are conditioned to be sociable at all costs and therefore show different symptoms.”*

Johanna describes the temporary sense of relief that came with diagnosis. She writes:

*During my hospitalisation the psychiatrist took me aside and said, ‘Diagnosis time!’ I had been labelled with so many stickers in my life that this came as a surprise. ‘I suspect you have an autism spectrum disorder. Depression and psychosis are secondary,’ he said.*

*Deep down I had suspected this myself. But it is common knowledge that autism is harder to detect in women, who are conditioned to be sociable at all costs and therefore show different symptoms.*

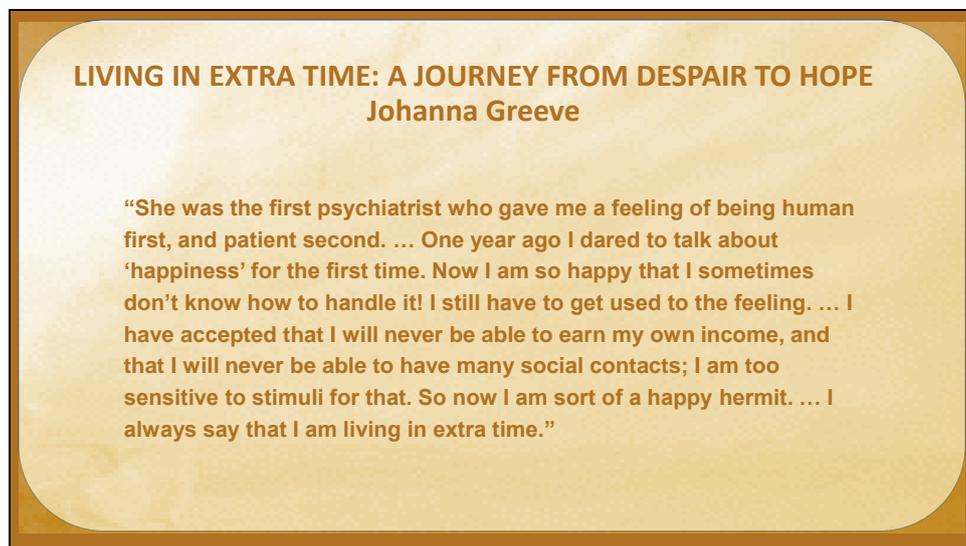
The diagnosis of autism did not bring immediate relief to Johanna, but rather intensified her despair and led her to contemplate suicide.

- What does her story reveal to us about the cost of socialisation and conformity?
- Why do you think women with autism mask it more successfully because of the pressures to be sociable?

These are questions that relate to many of the issues we're addressing in this course.

You might like to take time to reflect, make some notes and come back.

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Johanna speaks of how at last she found peace and meaning through somebody who was able to help her. She writes:

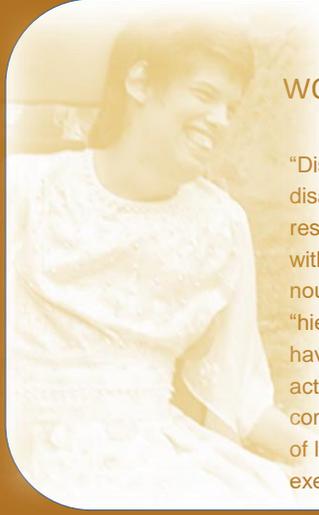
*She was the first psychiatrist who gave me a feeling of being human first, and patient second. ... One year ago I dared to talk about 'happiness' for the first time. Now I am so happy that I sometimes don't know how to handle it! I still have to get used to the feeling. ... I have accepted that I will never be able to earn my own income, and that I will never be able to have many social contacts; I am too sensitive to stimuli for that. So now I am sort of a happy hermit. ... I always say that I am living in extra time.*

- What does Johanna's story say to you about identity, sociability, happiness and faith?
- How might her story challenge some of our preconceived ideas and assumptions about these questions?

There are no single answers or right or wrong responses to such questions. Rather, Johanna's story invites us to reflect deeply on how we approach those who fail to conform to our expectations in terms of social conditioning and the good life. Perhaps her story also helps us to get in touch with those alienated and wounded spaces in our own souls, those aspects of ourselves that do not find a space to be in the narratives and cultures we inhabit. These are

insights that must be allowed time to develop, but you might like to take time to reflect on how you respond to this one woman's story, and to ask where it finds a response in your own story about who you are and where your sense of belonging comes from.

Slide 13



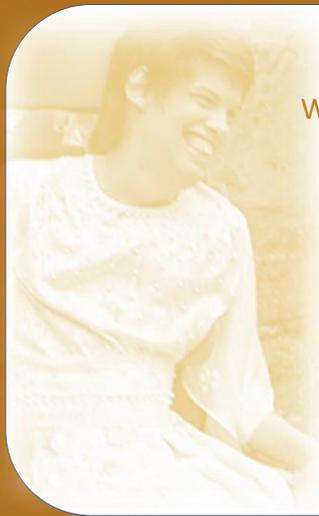
**A SPACE TO GROW: THE CHURCH AND WOMEN WHO ARE INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED**  
Cristina Gangemi

“Disabled women, especially women who are intellectually disabled, face particular challenges when seeking to respond to and activate their own personal call to vocation within the “ecclesial community ... where God’s call is born, nourished and expressed.” Because of what I call a “hierarchy of ability” in the *sensus fidelium*, disabled people have been largely conspicuous by their absence within the active and participatory life of vocation in parish communities. This absence has resulted in an experience of lament for disabled women who are prevented from exercising their place of belonging.”

Cristina Gangemi’s contribution to the book, “A Space to Grow – the Church and Women Who Are Intellectually Disabled”. This story speaks very deeply to Johanna’s story that we’ve just considered.

Cristina asks us to reflect on what it means to be an intellectually disabled woman in the context of faith, vocation and community. Her story also helps to enrich our understanding of the communal aspects of personhood, and of the need for a wide variety of narratives and symbolic meanings in order to allow people to discover who they are and where they belong, when they do not necessarily fit within the narrow range of options available within conventionally accepted identities and meanings.

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**A SPACE TO GROW: THE CHURCH AND WOMEN WHO ARE INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED**  
Cristina Gangemi

“As a disability adviser, I have experienced the pain of listening to stories of women who cannot understand why they have not been able to serve on the altar because of their disability and more importantly because of their gender. ... Where the expression of women who have been disabled is sought out and embraced, the Body of Christ is made complete. It is enriched by their creativity and grows by responding to their lament.”

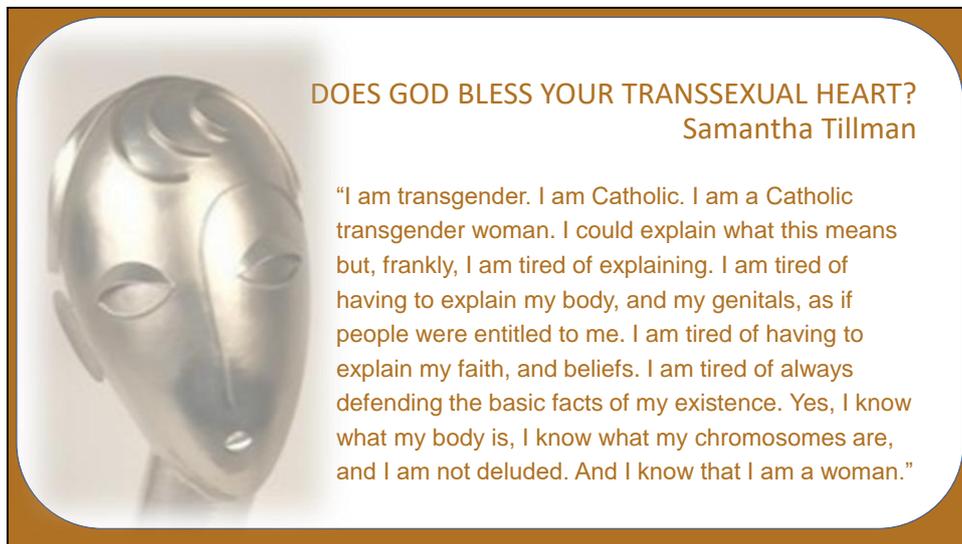
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- What does Cristina’s story tell us about the importance of listening and attentiveness?
- How do such stories of disability and difference challenge our understanding of personhood and meaning, and create spaces where deeper, richer meanings emerge?

We considered earlier Paul Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity, which involves prefiguration, configuration and refiguration. In what ways might attentiveness to the stories of women with intellectual disabilities refigure our concepts of self, other and God?

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**DOES GOD BLESS YOUR TRANSEXUAL HEART?**  
Samantha Tillman

“I am transgender. I am Catholic. I am a Catholic transgender woman. I could explain what this means but, frankly, I am tired of explaining. I am tired of having to explain my body, and my genitals, as if people were entitled to me. I am tired of having to explain my faith, and beliefs. I am tired of always defending the basic facts of my existence. Yes, I know what my body is, I know what my chromosomes are, and I am not deluded. And I know that I am a woman.”

Finally this week, we consider Samantha Tillman’s story, “Does God Bless Your Transsexual Heart?” Samantha calls into question cultural and religious norms governing gender, identity and personhood. Again, her story invites us to reflect on the relationship between our sense of self and our relationship to society in terms of the meanings we accept and the identities we agree to conform to in order to belong. Samantha writes:

*I am transgender. I am Catholic. I am a Catholic transgender woman. I could explain what this means but, frankly, I am tired of explaining. I am tired of having to explain my body, and my genitals, as if people were entitled to me. I am tired of having to explain my faith, and beliefs. I am tired of always defending the basic facts of my existence. Yes, I know what my body is, I know what my chromosomes are, and I am not deluded. And I know that I am a woman.*

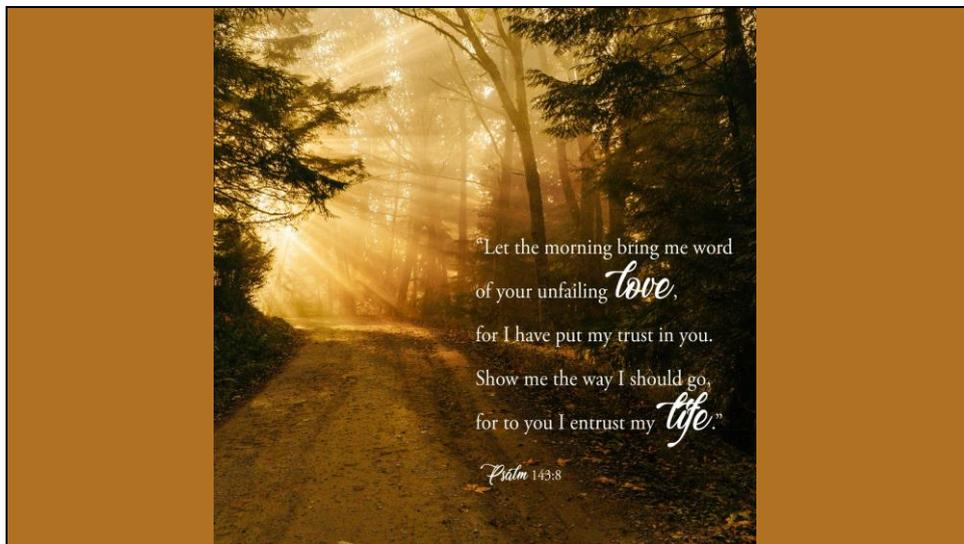
Reflect on her story in the context of the other stories we’ve been considering today. In each case, we have reflected on an example of a woman who has experienced a radical transformation in her cultural, religious or personal context, often accompanied by struggle and sometimes by deep trauma and distress.

All these stories reveal different facets of Catholic identity in the modern world. Some fit within existing narratives, other require the emergence of new possibilities and meanings.

Consider the ways in which the Christian story as seen through the lens of the Catholic tradition shapes these women's experiences and contributes to their quest for meaning and a sense of self. What have you discovered when working through these materials about personhood, faith and society? What questions are you left with, and what further reading and research would you like to do?

Please make notes in your journal to help you to consolidate this week's session into your learning experience, and to help you to think through some of the insights and challenges you have encountered.

Slide 16



That's the end of this week's session. Once again, I've put some materials for reflection on Moodle for you to use. I'm using Psalm 143:

Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love,  
For I have put my trust in you.  
Show me the way I should go,  
For to you I entrust my life.