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# The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Brían de Búrca

Regular Church  
goer of 70 years:  
– *‘That I have  
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May 2022

# Regular Church goer of 70 years:

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St Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* is the most significant of Paul’s letters both theologically and historically. It is his longest letter, written in the mid to late 50s and may well have been the last that he wrote.

Paul wrote to the Christian community in Rome: “To all the beloved of God in Rome” (Romans 1:7). This was a Church he had never visited and never evangelised; but, he gave thanks for their faith known throughout the world, told them that he prayed constantly for them and longed to see them (1:8-11). Rome was the most important city in his world. The Christians of Rome, at the centre of the Roman Empire, had many contacts, especially with the churches in Judea (Acts 28:21). Commentators have wondered how Paul could have known so many people in Rome. He sends greetings to no less than 26 people there (Romans 16:3-16). Paul may have been interested in showing the wide support he already enjoyed in Rome.

It is thought that Paul wrote the letter as a way of presenting himself to the Christians of Rome. Although he had neither founded nor visited the Christian community there we know from the many greetings in chapter 16 that there were quite a number in the community with whom he had lived and worked elsewhere. By the early 50s Paul was a controversial figure suspected by some of “playing fast and loose with the Jewish heritage of Christianity.” Jerusalem was a Church which still held him in suspicion because of misunderstandings about his attitude to the Mosaic Law. The Roman community, despite its Gentile composition, may have remained sympathetic to the Jewish heritage in which it had been

1 I sent this article to a few friends. One wrote back saying it made very welcome reading for her and she thought it made an important contribution to present thinking on the role of women in the Church. She added “As a regular church goer of 70 years the fact that I have never heard those passages in church speaks for itself!”. Those words appealed to me and are now my preferred title for the article.

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nurtured, and Paul could be writing to “set the record straight about himself.”<sup>2</sup>

The letter starts with a greeting to the Christian community in Rome, 1:1-17. Then follows the body of the letter from 1:18-15:13 and from 15:14-16:27 we have Paul’s conclusion to the letter where he sends greetings to individuals in the Christian community in Rome.

### CHAPTER 16

The letter to the Romans is heard *more often* than any other as the Second Reading on Sundays in the three-year lectionary. We read from this letter up to 28 times in the course of the three year Sunday lectionary cycle. It is considered relevant at all times of the Church’s year. It is also read during year 1 in weeks 29,30 31 and it is then, and then only, that we read from ch. 16. On Saturday of week 31, year 1, we read *part* of chapter 16 of Romans. I give here the first sixteen verses of this chapter:

- <sup>1</sup> *I would like you to welcome our sister Phoebe. She is a deacon of the church in Cenchreae.*
- <sup>2</sup> *I ask you to receive her as one who belongs to the Lord. Receive her in the way God’s people should. Give her any help she may need from you. She has been a great help to many people, including me.*
- <sup>3</sup> *Greet Priscilla and Aquila. They work together with me in serving Christ Jesus.*
- <sup>4</sup> *They have put their lives in danger for me. I am thankful for them. So are all the Gentile churches.*
- <sup>5</sup> *Greet also the church that meets in the house of Priscilla and Aquila. Greet my dear friend Epenetus. He was the first person in Asia Minor to become a believer in Christ.*
- <sup>6</sup> *Greet Mary. She worked very hard for you.*
- <sup>7</sup> *Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews. They have been in prison with me. They are leaders among the apostles. They became believers in Christ before I did.*
- <sup>8</sup> *Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Greet Urbanus. He works together with me in serving Christ. And greet my dear friend Stachys.*
- <sup>10</sup> *Greet Apelles. He remained faithful to Christ even when he was tested. Greet those who live in the house of Aristobulus.*

2 Byrne, Brendan *Sacra Pagina Romans* p. 9 – Byrne gives other possible reasons for Paul’s writing to the Roman Christian Community.

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- <sup>11</sup> *Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew. Greet the believers who live in the house of Narcissus.*
- <sup>12</sup> *Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa. Those women work hard for the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis. She is another woman who has worked very hard for the Lord.*
- <sup>13</sup> *Greet Rufus. He is a chosen believer in the Lord. And greet his mother. She has been like a mother to me too.*
- <sup>14</sup> *Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon and Hermes. Greet Patrobas, Hermas and the other brothers and sisters with them.*
- <sup>15</sup> *Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister. Greet Olympas and all of the Lord's people who are with them.*
- <sup>16</sup> *Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send their greetings.*

Robert J. Karris writes: "To some, Romans 16:1-16 may appear to be as inspiring as reading a church directory. To others it has become a window into Romans and the early church. Behind 16:5, 10, 11, 14, 15 there is evidence of at least *five* house churches in Rome, or more probably tenement church houses. See, for example, 16:5: "Greet also the church at their house," that is, the house of Prisc(ill)a and Aquila. There are *eight* women mentioned as active in promoting the gospel: Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Junia, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis and Rufus' mother."<sup>3</sup>

As we enter our post Covid Church era I believe scripture scholars could share with us how the early Church, with its system of house churches, developed. From Romans 16 we see a community organised around house churches run by *lay* women *and* men. It was only in the 4th century that churches were built. We are in the process of closing churches. The number of priests under the age of 70 is decreasing rapidly, vocations to the ministerial priesthood are few in number. The Roman community had no church but did have quite a number of house churches that were lay run. Have we a lot to learn from the early Church as we seek a way forward?

### ROLE OF WOMEN

Of the *women* mentioned in Romans 16 *Priscilla (Prisca)* and her husband Aquila are mentioned a few times in the Acts of the Apostles and in Pauline letters. St Paul had lived with them when they were expelled from Rome during Emperor Claudius expulsion of the Jews in the 40s. Interesting, also, is that four times when Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned in the New Testament we do not read Aquila and Priscilla, but Priscilla and Aquila. Priscilla's name is mentioned firstly, before that of her husband.

3 Harris, Robert J OFM *New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Galatians and Romans.* p. 93.

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*Junia* is another lady mentioned by Paul. “*Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews. They have been in prison with me. They are leaders among the apostles. They became believers in Christ before I did*” (Romans 16:7). Junia, a woman, being called an apostle has caused problems for some. Kathryn J. Riss makes the point that “Despite the modern mistranslation of her name as masculine “Junias” or “Junius,” no commentator prior to the 13th century questioned that this apostle was a woman.”<sup>4</sup> Robert J. Karris writes “I make three points about Junia (16:7). *First*, she is a woman. St John Chrysostom (d. 407), who was proficient in Greek and was a misogynist, commented: “To be an apostle is something great. But to be outstanding among the apostles, just think of what a wondrous song of praise that is ... Truly, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle. *Second*, the fathers of the church and Greek grammar indicate that Junia is an apostle and outstanding among apostles and not merely held in high regard by male apostles. *Third*, Junia was not an apostle of a church, for nowhere in 16:7 does Paul refer to her as such. ... I am of the opinion that Junia is an apostle in the same sense as Paul, who had seen the risen Lord (1 Cor 9:1) but was not one of the twelve. She may have been among the five hundred who saw the risen Lord (1 Cor 15:6).”<sup>5</sup>

*Phoebe* is mentioned in the first verses of chapter 16. Phoebe is a little known saint whose feast day falls on September 3. What little is known of St. Phoebe and her part in the early Church is derived from her brief mention in the first two verses from Romans 16:

*“I would like you to welcome our sister Phoebe. She is a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her as one who belongs to the Lord. Receive her in the way God’s people should. Give her any help she may need from you. She has been a great help to many people, including me” (Romans 16:1-2).*

Cenchreae was a port city near Corinth, from where Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, and it is almost certain that Phoebe was the bearer of his letter to Rome. And it is likely that Phoebe not only carried Paul’s letter to the house churches but also read it to them. Phoebe was likely among the five per cent of the population that could read. That she be well received by the community and make a favourable impression on them is clearly central to Paul’s whole enterprise in dealing with Rome. Hence the care with which he introduces and commends her. “Brief though it is

4 Riss Kathryn J. *Women in Church History: Women’s Ministries in the early Church.*  
5 Karris Robert J. *New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Galatians and Romans.* pp 94-95.

Paul's commendation of Phoebe is an important indication of the leadership roles exercised by women in the early communities. It is also not without significance that the document many have judged to be the most influential in Christian history (*Paul's letter to Rome*) was entrusted to this woman on the long and risky journey to its destination, its ultimate reception very much dependent upon the impression she herself was to make on the recipient community.<sup>6</sup> Paul gives Phoebe *three* titles: "sister," "deacon," and "patron" (Rom 16:1-2).

To call her a "*sister*" simply names her as a fellow Christian and as such entitled to be received with hospitality customary across the community to believers.

To say she is "*deacon* of the church in Cenchreae" means that she is a minister of the church in Corinth's port city. While we cannot read into the term "deacon" all the features attaching to the office of the "diaconate" in the later church, the description does imply that Phoebe exercised the ministry of "service" in a continuing and recognised capacity. The precise role of deacons in the first-century churches is uncertain, but New Testament usage typically connects the term with evangelism and table ministries, duties which later Christians gave to Bishops and presbyters. The title signifies to the Roman community that the bearer of the letter is a personage of stature within the churches of the East.

The translation "deaconess" which is sometimes found is not correct and indeed totally misleading, since this refers to an order of diakonal women that arose in the third century. Paul uses the masculine form *diakonos* to refer to Phoebe – he does not call her a "deaconess", the feminine had not yet evolved, so there is no question of any distinction of duties because of her gender.

Paul says even more of this remarkable woman of the 50s: "She has been a *great help* to many people, including me" (Rom 16:2).

A Great Help: The Greek word used is *prostatis*, usually translated in Romans 16:2 as helper, *patron* or benefactor. This reference has been much studied in recent years as we seek to understand better these women in Paul's life. It is the feminine form of the masculine *prostatés*. In both genders the word generally means patron or sponsor of some kind. Phoebe is an aristocratic woman who uses her assets to support missionary work by Paul and many others. She pays their expenses and connects them with other powerful individuals who can help their work prosper. We may view Phoebe as a woman co-worker of Paul; some think their Roman contemporaries would have thought it more appropriate to call Paul a man co-worker of Phoebe.

6 Byrne, Brendan *Sacra Pagina Romans*. p. 448.

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St Phoebe's importance in the early Church has not been easily recognised or accepted. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza wrote: "Although Phoebe (Rom 16:1ff) is the only person in the Pauline literature to receive an official letter of recommendation and although she is given three substantive titles – sister, *diakonos*, and *prostatis* – her significance for the early Christian mission is far from acknowledged. Exegetes tend to denigrate these titles, or to interpret them differently, because they are given to a woman. Whenever Paul uses the title *diakonos* to refer to himself or another male leader, exegetes translate it "minister," "missionary," or "servant." In the case of Phoebe they usually translate it as "deaconess." After characterising Phoebe as an "obviously well-to-do and philanthropic lady," Lietzman (History of the early Church) goes on to say: "Even at that time there had long been women deacons in the Christian church whom, *when their sex made them especially suitable*, came forward and gave significant help in caring for the poor and sick, and at the baptism of women." Similarly Michel notes: "It is possible that Phoebe 'served' women, the sick or friends and perhaps gave also assistance at baptism of women." Unconsciously these exegetes are projecting back into the first century the duties of deaconesses in later centuries. However, Phoebe's "office" in the church of Cenchræa is not limited by prescribed gender roles. She is not a deaconess of the women, but a minister of the whole church."<sup>7</sup>

Every second year, on Saturday of week 31 our first reading is from Romans 16. The first two verses of this chapter introduce Phoebe to all: "*I would like you to welcome our sister Phoebe. She is a deacon of the church in Cenchræa. I ask you to receive her as one who belongs to the Lord. Receive her in the way God's people should. Give her any help she may need from you. She has been a great help to many people, including me*". These two verses concerning Phoebe are *omitted* and the reading in our lectionary begins with 16:3 "*Greet Prisca and Aquila. ...*" and continues until v.9 jumping from there to verse 16 with all names of those mentioned between vv9-15 also *omitted*.

## CONCLUSION

I ask:

1. For what reasons were verses 1,2 of Romans 16 which mention Phoebe, "*sister*," "*deacon*," and "*patron*" omitted by those who prepared our present lectionary? We have been, and still are, a very male dominated Church. John Reumann rightly noted

<sup>7</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. *In Memory of Her*. p. 170.

- “Subsequent male-dominated churches have long blocked giving Phoebe her due.”<sup>8</sup>
2. Why were verses 9-15 also left out of the lectionary reading? Ch. 16 gives us a wonderful list of women and men’s names who were involved in the different house churches and life of the Roman church. It is a list of baptised laity sharing in the priesthood of Christ who were deeply involved in their church assemblies/ gatherings. They were the foundations out of which the church there grew. I believe Romans 16:1-16 could be the subject of a great homily as we look forward to a Church with the greater involvement of all the baptised.
  3. Our Church is *now* making progress in acknowledging the role of women. This is highlighted in Paul’s list of names in Romans 16. Mary Anne Getty-Sullivan wrote:
 

*“Romans 16 offers some really interesting avenue of exploration to those interested in women in the New testament. We are introduced to a world of possibilities for women in the early Church, women whom we would not know about were it not for this chapter. In Romans 16 we hear of women who were leaders in local churches, as well as independent travelling missionaries, deacons, and patrons, like Phoebe. Prisca, the well travelled, scholarly missionary who was a patron to the church in Corinth and Ephesus and who partnered with her husband in business as well as religion, is mentioned again here. Junia, together with Andronicus (perhaps her husband?), is called an apostle. Women named Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis formed commendable partnerships in fruitful missionary endeavours. Since Tryphaena and Tryphosa are paired together in Paul’s greetings, they possibly lived together in mutual support as well. In fact, ten of the twenty-four people we know from this chapter are women, many having a name in their own right, with or without reference to a man who is husband, father, or son. The collage Paul constructs in this list of greetings only hints at the significance of each woman mentioned. We wish we knew more, but at least we know this much from what Paul says”*<sup>9</sup>

It would be great to hear the Romans 16 read in its *entirety*, and a homily explaining its importance, not just on a Saturday in year one, but as part of our Sunday cycle. Perhaps the proposed revised lectionary will consider *including* Phoebe and the missing verses from 9-15, and who knows, there might even be women on the panel choosing the readings.

8 John Reumann, *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible. Romans*. p 1310.

9 Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament*, The Liturgical Press Collegeville, Minnesota 2001. pp. 252 – 258.