
GOSPEL LEADERSHIP: ROMAN CATHOLIC WOMEN PRIESTS

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Abstract

In 2002, two Roman Catholic male bishops ordained seven women on a ship cruising the Danube River. Since then, over 350 women have been ordained. This article describes the leadership these women offer faith, local, and institutional communities. Grounded in spirituality, these women choose to disobey church law while remaining culturally Catholic. Outlining the spiritualities these women embody, this article explores contributions within the ministries of Koinonia, Leiturgia, Kerygma, and Diakonia. Quoting the over forty women interviewed and studied, the article next focuses on their ecumenical and Catholic nature. The conclusion highlights their prophetic contribution to the church and the people of G-d.

Introduction

We met in a typical hotel room after a day when we had witnessed the ordination of a woman to the Roman Catholic ecclesial community. We had known the woman we interviewed, Teresa¹,

¹ Each priest is named using her first name. We have permission from most to use their names, and others have asked for confidentiality. We are also aware that some can be identified by readers, and allies may be implicated if too much information is disclosed. There is no current formula of address for these priests. Formally, one would use Rev. and the last name. That becomes quite cumbersome in an article so we have defaulted to first names for the most part. On occasion, we have included last names that identify authors of texts. No other characters have names in the piece, so all named people are ordained Roman Catholic Women Priests (RCWP).

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since the 1980s. Callahan served as a pastoral assistant with her in a parish; Rodriguez had taught her at Seattle University, a Jesuit Catholic institution in Seattle, Washington.

Teresa started as a physical education teacher for school children attached to the parish and for older participants at a local senior center. She shifted to working with teenagers and after earning her Master of Divinity she served as a Pastoral Life coordinator in parishes in Washington and Idaho. Throughout her journey she felt called to priesthood and sought every opportunity to argue for ordination of women. For much of that time, she was frustrated and angry having been prevented from fulfilling her G-d-given call to priesthood. Yet, in this room on this night, we began our study with a woman who had found peace and joy.

Teresa is one of forty Roman Catholic Women Priests (RCWP) that appear in this article. Ordained with apostolic succession but illegally according to the Code of Canon Law, these priests serve congregations in Western Europe, Canada, Great Britain, South and North America. While specifically studying the spirituality of these women, the authors identified a shift in leadership that reflects some changes in congregational life since the 1960s.

In total, we interviewed thirty-three Roman Catholic Woman Priests over a two-year period. Employing an ethnographic phenomenological methodology, we: culled nine additional stories from written documents; observed two ordinations, seven Masses, and several web-based liturgies; reviewed the entire archival holdings for this movement housed at Marquette University, a Jesuit research university in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and visited multiple sites in each of the RCWP regions.

Seeking to identify the spiritual journeys and lives of RCWP, we utilized a semistructured interview process that allowed for follow-up questions to clarify and expand initial answers. Since some of the work has been completed during the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were at times conducted in person and at times by Zoom, a teleconferencing tool. Both researchers took notes during the recording, and one researcher typed most of the transcripts. All the transcripts and other documents have been entered into NVivo,

an electronic program designed to assist researchers in developing codes and themes from interview transcripts.

Throughout the two-year process we met weekly to discuss our observations, pray over our process and findings, and share notes and insights. As Tim Sensing notes, we exerted extreme care to ensure internal validity of the data, so that we could present reliable and trustworthy findings.² Like Mary Clark Moschella, we valued the pastoral practice of the women and their congregants. Our efforts sought to discern the values embedded in their actions as priests. Thus, we studied the ways in which these women and their congregants live and lead in their faith communities.³

Throughout the process we sought to lift up the wisdom of the minoritized voices of Roman Catholic women. We embraced the challenge of bringing these voices, insights and ways of knowing to the table of academic, ecclesial, and theological credibility. As Moschella advises: “By moving the focus of our attention to the actual practice of religion in a given setting, pastoral theologians can perceive the situated values and ‘traces of God’ in that setting. The result will be more respectful, diverse, with particular interpretations of Christian faith and praxis, along with more complex and sensitive expressions of pastoral care.”⁴ We discovered much more than we anticipated.

This article addresses the Gospel leadership these women currently exercise in the Roman Catholic Church. It starts with the people—the leaders themselves. Studies in leadership during the 1990s and early 2000s considered the connection of leadership with spirituality. We briefly outline the women’s spiritual journeys specifically as they affect their leadership. Next, we look at the ways the women embody their call to ministry. Acknowledging that the call is initiated sacramentally in baptism, we explore how that baptismal call to priest, prophet, and leader intensifies as these

² Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

³ Mary Clark Moschella, “Food, Faith, and Formation: A Case Study on the Use of Ethnography in Pastoral Theology and Care,” *The Journal of Pastoral Theology* 12(1) (2002): 77.

⁴ Moschella, 85.

women demonstrate the four expressions of leadership in the early church: Koinonia, Leiturgia, Kerygma and Diakonia.⁵ Finally, we will highlight two types of leadership offering the potential for ecclesial renewal: ecumenical and inter-religious, and prophetic.

Leadership and Spirituality

The Roman Catholic Church remains closed to the ordination of women and married priests. Yet, women have chosen to stay in the church and now some serve as ordained priests. As we learned from those interviewed, this phenomenon quietly as well as publicly creates new leadership strategies and practices. While women-who-become-priests are officially excommunicated and therefore ostracized by the hierarchy, they insist on remaining in the church and reject the effort to discount their apostolic succession and legitimate, if illegal, priesthood. They speak of a direct call from G-d, processes of fostering their spiritual lives, and determination to live as authentic priests in their communities.

Women Leaders With a Deep Connection to G-d

Callahan's doctoral dissertation studied the competencies needed to serve at any level of leadership in the Roman Catholic

⁵ These marks are chosen from six marks identified by many denominational sources. The six marks include *Kerygma*, *Koinonia*, *Leiturgia*, *Didache* and *Martyria*. Archbishop John Bathersby and Rev. Dr. David Rankin outlined the six marks in their joint statement *The Mission of the Church: Report of the National Dialogue Between the Roman Catholic Church and the Uniting Church in Australia* (2002-2008) with final revisions as of (2008):3. These are also emphasized by Idara Otu *Communion Ecclesiology and Social Transformation in African Catholicism Between Vatican Council II and African Synod II*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2020). Both of these documents reflect earlier notions delineated by Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, Expanded Edition. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1987). Dulles expands these marks as he suggests models of ecclesial communities that emphasize the importance of some marks over others. An internet search finds that ELCA, UMC, as well as Uniting and Anglican churches in Canada, South Africa, Australia, and the U.S. ascribe to these as important areas of ministerial leadership.

Archdiocese of Western Washington.⁶ Using a Delphi method to determine consensus among leaders about the qualities of leadership needed in the future, the study found that 99% of the respondents asserted that leaders must demonstrate connection to the Holy. Subsequent articles published in the *Journal of Religious Leadership*⁷ documented the concern with spirituality and leadership both in religious and secular scholarship during the 1990s through the beginning of the twenty-first century. The Roman Catholic Women Priests we interviewed described their deep and abiding connection with G-d.

Sandra Schneiders defines the academic discipline of Christian spirituality as studying “the God-human relationship.”⁸ She further notes that spirituality often encompasses a life of exploring and knowing the transcendent. She maintains that in Christian spirituality, spirituality is necessarily Triune, with a perceived emphasis on the Christ, but clearly embracing a notion of the Holy Spirit. She asserts that “studies in spirituality do not aim to develop a second-order theoretical language about the spiritual life. . .but to investigate the spiritual life as it is and has been concretely lived.”⁹ Thus, we share our findings related to RCWP spiritual lives using their own words.

Most of our interviewees were very articulate about their connection to the Holy One. For example, Jane spoke of being spiritually aware at three years of age while on her swing in her backyard. Maria, who was raised in a German orphanage during World War II, said that at age eleven she was allowed to watch the sunset and say goodbye to “You” and greet “You” each morning. Those moments filled her with hope each day. Jean spoke of the

⁶ Sharon Henderson Callahan, *A Delphi Study of the Competencies Needed by Leaders of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Western Washington Through the Year 2000*, Dissert. Seattle University (1996)364 (UNI No. 9716963).

⁷ Sharon Henderson Callahan, “Shifting Images of Church Invite New Leadership Frames,” *The Journal of Religious Leadership* 1(1):82.

⁸ Sandra Schneiders, “What is Christian Spirituality?” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed Arthur holder (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) 16.

⁹ Schneiders, 18.

importance of her near-death experience. Having unshakable confidence in G-d's call, she knew deeply that she would live to ordination and was committed to work through the arduous process.

As priests, the women use art, music, and drama to evoke emotional and spiritual connection to the Divine Mystery within the congregants. For example, they strive to break free from the dominance of male language to describe the Sacred. Liturgies are rewritten to include multiple names for the Holy in each celebration. One will find: Mother, Father, Holy, G-d, Spirit, Love, Sophia, Wisdom and so many more.¹⁰ Using the Roman sacramentary to pattern their worship, they reject the dominance of male language for humans and for the sacred.¹¹

The women priests and their congregants explore the lives of historical women for insight into their spiritual and priestly lives. Thus, they choose to imitate spiritual predecessors such as Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Ávila, Thérèse of Lisieux, Mary of Magdala, Our Lady of Guadalupe, and Dorothy Day. While some mention Mary, mother of Jesus, most reject limitations imposed on women through male dominance of Mary's story. Seeking liberation from oppression, these women strive to free themselves from "a traditional theology rooted in a patriarchal anthropology [that] does not have a path for women's emancipation and autonomy."¹²

According to Callahan's doctoral study, parish leaders linked integrity to one's spiritual life.¹³ As Schneiders' definition indicates, a person who pursues a spiritual path embraces a life of discipleship. We found the RCWP women recounted long spiritual journeys. Mostly retired or semiretired, these women have, like Teresa, served in multiple volunteer and paid lay ministry positions. They sustained their work with prayer, weekly and daily

¹⁰ Ordination Rites in RCWP Archives at Marquette University, Department of special Collections and University Archives. Series 1. And ARCWP Archives at Marquette University, Department of special Collections and University Archives. Series 3, Box 1.

¹¹ Mass amended to inclusive language by Rev. Jane Via, Ph.D., J.D.

¹² Ivone Gebara, "Ecofeminism: A Latin American Perspective," *Crosscurrents* 53(1):7.

¹³ Callahan, *Delphi*, 364.

Mass attendance, retreats, spiritual direction, spiritual reading, and ongoing education. Most are partnered and their partners work with them to foster Christian community. All have supported their livelihood through employment and support their priestly ministries through retirement benefits or through continued work outside the congregations they serve. They are the tentmaker ministers modeled by Paul, Lydia, and Juno in the early church.

Each of these priests faced a conflict from the time they knew they were called to serve G-d as leaders in a faith community. Most had this or a similar experience as children: Vividly aware of the Holy when they attended Sunday Mass, they witnessed the priest on the altar inviting people to pray, reading the Scriptures and speaking about them to the people, consecrating the elements, and distributing the Eucharist. Like many Catholic kids, these young girls went home and imitated the process using Necco wafers, a type of round, flat, hard candy. They saw themselves as priests and when they told others what they hoped to be, they were universally told that only men could be priests. They were redirected to the vowed religious life as suitable for women. As they grew, a surprising number explored the vowed religious life. Until 2002, however, none found a way to pursue what they knew to be their core call to priesthood.

When the original seven women were ordained in 2002, they sent a message to the Roman Catholic Church around the world. Three bishops of the Church chose to disobey the practice and law (Canon 1024)¹⁴ and to ordain women legitimately in apostolic succession even if not licitly—that is, against the law (*contra legem*).¹⁵ These first RCWP were from Germany and Austria. Two of the Germans, Iris Müller and Ida Raming, wrote extensively about the theological imperative to ordain women. The seven women included another German, Dagmar Celeste, who lived

¹⁴ *The Code of Canon Law of 1983 in English Translation* (New York: Harper-Collins Pub, 1983) c.1024.

¹⁵ Iris Müller and Ida Raming, *Contra Legem—A Matter of Conscience. Our Lifelong Struggle for Human Rights for Women in the Roman-Catholic Church*. Trans. Harry Radday and Linda Maloney (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010).

in Ohio and thus became the first ordained American woman. Facing immediate excommunication from the Church, the women rejected the excommunication while claiming total allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church.

The threat of excommunication for daring to break the law loomed large in each of the RCWP spiritual journeys. For decades each woman suffered the pain of knowing God called them to something humans denied them. The threat of excommunication warned them that they faced exclusion from the people they had served as volunteers and paid staff in their parishes, loss of income, loss of burial rites in the Church, loss of retirement benefits, and loss of friends and family.

During one visit with a community in Lacey, Washington, Callahan and Rodriguez spoke with congregants. At our table we met again people whom we had educated at the School of Theology and Ministry. We knew these men and women and shared dinner with them. One had been a pastoral associate and a spiritual director for a Benedictine community nearby. She and others said they no longer found their home in the parish communities in which they had raised their children and celebrated their lives.

The women priests and their congregants pursued discipleship in deeply spiritual ways. They met God in sacraments, prayer, nature, and community. They shared spiritual insights through art, poetry, and drama. They suffered limits in opportunity due to their gender, and each priest testified to her personal struggle to accept God's call to the priesthood while distancing herself from the hierarchical church she had spent her life serving.

Four Leadership Ministries of the Early Church

Like ministers in many other ecclesial communities, our representatives of RCWP reflect the historical four marks of ministry in the early church. They facilitate and nurture deep affection (*koinonia*) among members. They preside over and foster collaborative liturgy (*leiturgia*) and sacramental life. As teachers and preachers, they proclaim the Christian message (*kerygma*); and they practice pastoral care and commitment to social justice (*diakonia*).

Koinonia: All Are Welcome¹⁶

During our study we observed several liturgical celebrations conducted by women priests. Attendance at these services ranged from between twenty-five to over 150 participants. The priests and people welcomed everyone. Throughout the celebration of Eucharist, they invited the whole community to read the prayers together. The whole community blessed the bread and wine. All were invited to the table as evidenced in one liturgy of ordination; the priest said: “We have all been blessed and called to this table which is the altar of Jesus Christ. All are welcome to approach this table to receive Communion.”¹⁷

During lunch with congregants in California, one woman stated, “We are the church for those dispossessed by others.” Another at the table agreed and indicated that their community welcomed divorced and remarried Catholics, people of all faiths or even no faiths, LBGTQ+, and folks of every economic strata. As we shared lunch provided by the hands of those gathered around the table, we recalled the stories of Jesus at table with tax collectors and sinners.

Jesus, the Spirit, Ruach, G-d as Creator, Love, MotherFather G-d—all are names invoked in addressing the G-d of their shared belief.¹⁸ They believe as Paul instructed in 1 Corinthians 12 that each of them contributes gifts given for the upbuilding of the community. For example, in our conversation, Teresa noted that her main leadership style was that of facilitating gifts. As pastor she paid attention to the people, learned who they were, encouraged them to claim the power of their baptism and their distinctive gifts, and facilitated their use in the communal reign of G-d to which each has been gifted for the edification of the entire Body of Christ (I Corinthians 12:7).

¹⁶ The leadership descriptors in each of the headings are drawn from the Ordination rituals found at Marquette University Department of special Collections and University Archives. Thanks to William Fliss for his outstanding help and careful cataloguing.

¹⁷ Ordination of Chava (Michelle) Redonnet. May 1, 2010. Marquette University Department of special Collections and University Archives. Series 1.

¹⁸ We reviewed 12 ordination liturgies and ten prayer gatherings. We found over 50 names for G-d used throughout the celebrations.

Unlike those surveyed in a recent study by the Barna Group, in which 56% of practicing Christians believe that their calling is a solo journey, the congregants and RCWP claim close communal connection.¹⁹ Those we visited testified to their desire to come together, to celebrate and support each other in their faith lives. While they easily identified obstacles and sufferings that got in their way, they also readily named allies and communities who supported them. Even their journey to ordination required communal sharing directed by spiritual directors and companions. Theirs is a thoroughly relational spiritual path.

As faculty who taught in the School of Theology and Ministry at Seattle University, we came to know exceptional Catholic lay leaders, and a few became women priests. They typically serve small congregations. (Chaves discovered that 75% of all Protestant congregations have seventy-five people or fewer)²⁰ but they dedicate themselves to fostering rich and vibrant community. Again, Teresa summarized the RCWP commitment to developing *koinonia*: “I do believe that the ministerial priesthood allows for that focus to form community to happen. I think that’s part of what I do: my presence in the community really does form community.”

Leiturgia: *Come and Rejoice*

The sacramental life of the Roman Catholic Church constitutes a major source of spiritual care. As the early church celebrated baptism and eucharist, it appears that the community gathered, some read from scripture, and some poured water and said the words recorded in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. As Roman Catholic priests, these women embrace the sacramental—thus liturgical—aspect of their ministries. Each of them spoke of their work in Eucharistic celebrations, anointing of the sick and dying, reconciliation, and

¹⁹ Stephanie Shackelford and Bill Denzel, *You on Purpose* (Barna Group 2021) https://www.barna.com/research/pc-calling/?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium accessed 10/2/2021.

²⁰ Mark Chaves, Mary Ellen Konieczny, Kraig Beyerlein and Emily Barman. “The National Congregations Study, Background, Methods, and Selected Results,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 38(4) (1999):459-476,468-469. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1387606>

baptism. They officiate at weddings and burials. That is the *leiturgia* of the church—the work of the liturgy, the rituals that accompany all aspects of communal life.

Our observations of liturgies included ordinations and weekly Masses. We were struck by the predominance of women at the altar. Each liturgy followed the familiar Roman Catholic rite. Yet, each is creatively expressed in more inclusive ways.²¹

One of the priests we interviewed reflected that she listens carefully to what people say during the prayers of the faithful and the shared homily times. She follows up with individuals after the celebration as a result of her deep listening. Another notes who is there and who is missing, and she makes visits or calls during the week to ensure that people are well and cared for.

Jane Via, a Scripture scholar who taught at San Diego University and a lawyer who served as an assistant district attorney and now a bishop, thought of herself as a teacher. Yet, she reflected, “Much to my amazement it turns out I have some liturgical gifts . . . so I exercised liturgical leadership that I think was very important.” She established a liturgical commission that eventually functioned without her input. She translated the rituals from the sacramentary so they would reflect inclusive language and multiple images of G-d. She worked with the song leaders to amend male-only wording so that music, action and preaching all reflected a liturgical wholeness.

While some congregations led by Roman Catholic Women Priests celebrate weekly liturgies, others manage bi-monthly or monthly liturgies. They all commit to using a reworked and more inclusive version of the Roman Catholic Sacramentary to guide their liturgical celebrations.²² Kathleen describes her commitment to leading and participating in weekly Eucharistic celebrations:

I think it's more like what Ron Rolheiser writes—it's—the eucharist and sacraments are G-d making love to us. Yeah. Jesus. . . I believe Jesus was already present and

²¹ Ordination Liturgies accessed at Marquette University Department of special Collections and University Archives. Series 1.

²² Via, Jane and Nancy Corran. *Comprehensive Catholic Lectionary*. <https://www.inclusivelectionary.org/>

Christ was present in the wheat that was ground. And it's blessed even more by all of us together, gathered to become more of that, and—and by participating—but we're in that eucharistic prayer. It's also us that gets blessed and transformed. It's not the bread and the wine. It's the community gathered. And so you become more of what you eat. And it's also our lives broken and shared. If, you know, you go out to your field hospitals, like Francis calls it, and then you come back, you're kind of broken down, and you share each other and the eucharist as food, as strength for that journey, to go back out.

Kathleen and Diane's community gathers the folks for weekly Eucharist, prayer in a small chapel, and centering prayer at least once a month. They then go out to care for people without homes and share food from their garden. What they do during the liturgy is embodied in everyday life, even as Kathleen stated.

In Ohio, Shannon admits to being a pretty “traditional” ordained minister. She ensures the community of St. Hildegard of Bingen celebrates weekly Mass, liturgy of the hours, weekly Bible study, rosary, and vespers. She wears vestments, and other women and men take on roles of reading, preaching, leading devotionals. Similarly, Juanita confides she is more liturgically centered. She created an altar in her house—the house church that celebrates weekly Eucharist. The community shares prayer, reading, homily, and consecration. Juanita maintains that the ordained priest has the gift of gathering and consecrating just as a doctor has the gift of healing.

Likewise, Maureen speaks about the attention she pays to liturgical work, the result of her training at Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California. Using her background in sacramental theology, she invites others to worship. She asserts that the priest's presence is essential in the liturgical celebration, but simultaneously maintains it is “the community at work in our liturgies.” In Colombia, Olga Alvarez, a bishop, asserts she is not in competition with the masculine clergy. Rather “I am a presbyter

serving the Church, announcing with joy the Kingdom of God, eradicating sexism, marginalization, inequality, present sins that harm the church.”

Kerygma: A Stole with a Fiery Motive

Ten women named teaching as their main joy and gift in the leadership that accompanies ordination. Since Peter's first proclamation after Pentecost, people who are ordained claim preaching and teaching the Word of God as central to their call. Pat of Toronto says simply, “My priestly ministry is to first and foremost keep the story of Jesus alive theologically.” Teresa speaks about how as people proclaim the readings from sacred Scriptures, one hears the word anew. Diane, Pat, Jean, and others speak about preparing conversation starters and questions to spark shared homilies. They claim their communities enjoy the opportunity to share insights with each other.

Naming teaching as her primary gift, Jane created a full inclusive language translation of the lectionary for all three cycles endorsed by the institutional church.²³ Diane Whalen also claimed teaching as a primary gift. Having spent over thirty years in parish ministry as a director of religious and/or adult education with responsibility for sacramental preparation, Diane participated in a local TEDx conference in Olympia.²⁴

Many of these women are highly educated and several have earned doctoral degrees. Shannon, like Diane, emerged from years of religious education experience at the parish level and at the diocesan level. She uses her doctorates to ground her writing and her preaching. She conducts pilgrimages to Bingen's original abbey in Germany. With a PhD in counseling, Donnieu teaches her community to share power and insight. She speaks eloquently about her work in helping members understand their baptismal call as taught through the documents of Vatican II.

²³ Jane Via, and Nancy Corran, *Comprehensive Catholic Lectionary*, <https://www.inclusivelectionary.org/>

²⁴ Diane Whalen was a featured speaker on the Olympia Washington TEDx theme of *Point of No Return*, <https://www.ted.com/tedx/events/14091>

Others share the word through art, music and drama. A university professor, Victoria started with street theater and communal Mass celebrations outside St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. She now works to bring people of the Scripture to life through drama, presenting reflections on Mary, Martha and others to faith communities throughout the West Coast. Similarly, Kathy creates quilted art to highlight aspects of liturgical feasts such as Pentecost, or to depict specific women saints as guides for her community. The proclamation of the Word remains core to the function of the priestly vocation for each of these women priests.

Diakonia: *The Basin and the Towel*

Roman Catholic Women Priests have emerged from a long tradition of service through various ministries in the Church. It should be no surprise, then, that most of them see themselves as servant leaders who offer personal outreach and justice leadership. Akin to the early church's decision²⁵ to call women to the diaconate, the RCWP name diaconal ministries as core to their priesthood: visiting the sick, listening to people and their pain, spiritual counseling, reconciliation, attending demonstrations for justice issues, and championing those who are otherwise ignored by the institutional church.

As priests, the women we interviewed continued their outreach and advocacy after ordination. For example, after Victoria moved to California, she continued her work in parks with those people who would otherwise not be welcome in church buildings. Like her, sociology professor Judy Lee and her partner Judy Beaumont began ministering to people without homes, helping them find homes and more secure future. When they moved their ordained ministries from the Northeast to Florida, they housed people and established a feeding program. In addition, they made multiple trips to Colombia to share their experience and eventually rescued a woman from persecution in Colombia. Now ordained, the woman works specifically with people of African and Latin American descent in Florida.

²⁵ Phyllis Zagano, *Women: Icons of Christ*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2020) 10.

Other priests have lived in Catholic worker communities and carried lessons of shared responsibility into their priesthoods. Kathleen focused on food sustainability and grew food, taught others to do the same, and her congregation now manages a garden and feeds people each month. She exclaimed that nothing brings her closer to G-d than working with those who are homeless.²⁶ She and others in their community take their towels and basins to San Francisco area to minister to folks while caring for their feet. Vikki—in Vancouver, British Columbia—continues to work in a Catholic worker house and to share housing with those who are needing some assistance. Their housing and work with the poor in their neighborhood support the work of the congregation and centers their spirituality. One priest works specifically with undocumented Latinx migrant workers. Her parish worships, proclaims the gospel, and feeds and houses several folks throughout the year. She also lobbies for immigration reform. Her name remains hidden to protect the people she serves.

Many priests were nurses and public health professionals before their ordination. As part of their priestly ministry, they continue to reach out to those who are shut in, suffering, or ill. Morag in Great Britain describes her list of people to contact. She acknowledges their isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic and knows from her years of experience as a public health nurse that these people suffer emotionally and psychically as well as spiritually without the connection of someone who cares and can bring the Eucharist. Juanita describes her work during this time as consecrating multiple hosts in her house church and taking them to people to distribute—as those in the earliest Christian communities did.

Joanna simply states, “I’m here for them. If someone is ill, I’ll call them. I’ll go visit.” She also joins protests when the community wants to register support for change for the common good. Marina Theresa agrees. “We visit people. I visit Hispanic people. I celebrate Mass and pray for the sick.” Paula notes that she has done anointings and visited several people. She further confides that when she visits in the hospital, several people have “felt disconnected from the

²⁶ Luc Novovitch, “God’s Daughters” documentary film.

church and have held guilt. I have been able to help them see that G-d is so much bigger than what they learned about. And that G-d is so loving and loves them so dearly and wants them to know that.”

In the same vein, Rosa states she is available for someone to call her and let her know what has been happening in their lives. She starts by listening. She describes her frame of mind: “I am talking to them really about what G-d is here for. And to help them see [what is possible] in the position they are in.” Similarly, Judy simply says, “My happiest days are those when I can reach out to somebody that is broken, totally broken, and help them put themselves back together with G-d’s help. And people would say, you do things nobody else could do, and I reply that it is easy, that G-d did it. G-d gave them this chance to become whole.”

Clearly, the women priests we studied embody the marks of the early church ministries: *koinonia*, *leiturgia*, *kerygma*, and *diakonia*. They create communities of care, ritualize important moments and celebrate sacraments, proclaim the Word and teach all who will listen. They continue their practice of serving the poor and suffering.

Leadership for Ecclesial Renewal

We found women priests to be spiritually aware and purposeful about living their Christian commitment in ways that cohere with classic Christian ministry categories. They have recognized and answered a perceived call from G-d to move into ordained ministry. Their stories and leadership match those of men and women from most Christian ecclesial communities. Indeed, it is the very ordinariness of their leadership that is remarkable. At the same time, their leadership reflects courage in the face of great personal and spiritual cost.

Their stories match the call and discipleship stories of countless men and women who have followed Jesus as they perceived his call. They mirror the call and discipleship stories recorded by ordained priests and bishops as well as saints in the Roman Catholic tradition. We are reminded of the late Ken Untener’s reflections on the call of

Peter and Andrew, “Like the disciples, I have been called by Jesus, called by name to associate myself with Jesus.”²⁷ It is sadly the case that although Untener’s call is endorsed by the hierarchy, the call of women to the priesthood is grounds for excommunication.

The hierarchical Roman Catholic Church has tried to close the door on women living fully into their call. Immediately after Vatican II, women and men anticipated new opportunities for answering their call to priesthood. Rejecting extensive theological and biblical research since that time, the Church remains adamant that women cannot be ordained priests. John Wijngaards reports: “Theologians who express doubts about the official line proclaimed by the Vatican are threatened with dismissal from their teaching posts at Catholic seminaries and colleges. Disagreement with ‘teaching authority’ is labelled as dissent or even heresy.”²⁸

As this article demonstrates, attempts to shut down the discussion and action failed. Women, with their silent and often anonymous male priest and bishop allies, work toward transforming the Roman Catholic Church. In the words of Leah Gaskin Fitchue, an ecumenical ally, these women have learned how to “redefine and experience authority as an internal possessive rather than an external mandate.”²⁹ Fitchue further explained that “a woman’s greatest sense of self and sense of agency is the quality of the relationship she has with her interior voice.”³⁰

Women priests are choosing to answer the call to ordination publicly and consistently—the same call they have heard since childhood. As Heifetz and Linsky comment about the dangers for courageous leadership: “leadership is a risky business”³¹ and

²⁷ *Little Blue Book for Advent and Christmas Seasons 2021-2022*. Based on the Writings of Bishop Ken Untener. Ed Catherine Haven and Nancy Ayotte. (Saginaw, MI: Diocese of Saginaw, 2021). Tuesday, First Week in Advent.

²⁸ <https://ten-commandments.org/opening/> John Wijngaards, *Ten Commandments for Church Reform: Memoirs of a Catholic Priest*, (Lafayette, LA: Acadian House Publishing, 2021)

²⁹ Leah Gaskin Fitchue, “Inner Journey of a Woman Servant Leader,” *In Trust*, (Autumn 2000):7.

³⁰ Fitchue, 7

³¹ Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004)11-12.

leaders carefully walk a “razor’s edge”³² that threatens their spiritual existence through excommunication and retribution from the institutional church while simultaneously claiming their agency as a call from G-d. As ordinary leaders of small congregations dedicated to systemic change, ordained women leaders rely on and foster ecumenical and inter-religious allies, and their stance is necessarily prophetic.

Ecumenical Allies

Since the ordination of women in mainline Protestant churches, Vatican officials worried that ecumenical dialogue would suffer. While some discussions at the highest levels may have stalled, the experience on the local levels seems to contradict hierarchical fears. Indeed, the bonding on the local level seems to have fostered a more shared understanding of universal call and participation in Christ’s work. At least that is the testimony of the RCWP, their congregants, and their hosts as we connected with them.

Theological education is a good example of the serendipitous ecumenicity of women’s journey into priesthood. While Roman Catholic institutions of higher education offered advanced theology degrees, many were in places that remained inaccessible to all women. Thus, many women shared Master of Divinity education with Protestant counterparts. At some moment during their educational experience, most of the women were asked to shift their Christian allegiance from Roman Catholicism to another ecclesial community. Dagmar Celeste describes her experience in being invited to preach and then preside at a United Methodist congregation prior to her graduation. Morag said that Episcopalians and Church of Scotland faculty and colleagues invited her multiple times to join their institutions so she could serve as priest. Indeed, one of our RCWP revealed that in a visit with her bishop prior to her ordination, he suggested she change ecclesial allegiance to prevent excommunication!

Like those identified through the writings of the early church,

³² Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994) 127-128.

these RCWP lead small congregations: house churches and partner church buildings. In a sense, catacombed from the institution to which they adhere, they mirror the type of leadership so many women in other ecclesial communities exhibit. By choice, they gather folks who are looking for a place to find community, belief, service. Unlike their ecumenical women peers, however, Roman Catholic women literally freed themselves to live outside the institution. This freedom encourages them to explore options of language, image, and ministry that the institutions may discourage. Unlike many of their ecumenical peers, however, these women are not sentenced to smaller congregations with little pay, smaller retirements, and little hope for advancement. They freely take no compensation for their work. There is no system of advancement in the RCWP experiment of prophetic life alongside the institution.

On the other hand, the pastors of many Protestant churches have risked offending Roman Catholic archbishops by offering those Protestant facilities as places of ordinations and eventual congregations. The RCWP movement is dependent on these ecumenical relationships for worship space, community gathering space, joint efforts in relation to social justice issues, and even shared worship on various occasions. On some occasions, Protestant and Jewish women and men have risked retribution from the Roman Catholic community, as they opened their doors to events that result in automatic excommunication for all the Catholic participants.

Recalling the ecumenical communion she experienced through her long struggle, Teresa commented,

I continue a relationship with the local Catholic parishes, parish members and our local inter-religious communities. However, there are new relationships and possibilities that manifest themselves because RCWP priesthood and our communities cannot be contained (and not welcomed by those who hold authority and power over the Church) within the traditional and hierarchical institution. We want to be led by Christ

and the Holy Spirit to form communities of inclusion

and welcome that offer service and companionship to all we encounter.

Each of the women we studied claims similar commitment and attests to ecumenical and in some cases inter-religious support.

Prophetic Leadership

Walter Brueggemann describes prophetic leadership as one that evolves out of deep connection to the community, usually situated in a smaller subcommunity. The community and prophetic spokespersons speak truth to the dominant community. The truth emanates from pain that is experienced and somewhat alleviated through attention to the tradition and renewal of that tradition in a new time. The subcommunity works together to change the oppression of the dominant community.³³

The RCWP embraces their collective task as prophets within the larger Christian and specifically Roman Catholic Church. Teresa summarizes here what others have said as well,

Yes, we priests and our communities are prophetic. Our existence challenges the structures of our Church that have oppressed us. We refuse to live in a muted and false sense of our baptism, our confirmation and our Eucharist....There's a sense that somehow we're trying to reform from the outside, but for me I always found that within the structure of the Church, that's where reformation, I think, truly happens.

Indeed, she speaks to the embodied reality of the woman priest even as Ivone Gebara writes about the challenge theologically.

Positing that the shift to full inclusion for women is actually cultural, Gebara argues that all theology needs renewal. Given there is a shift in philosophy, additional understanding of what it is to be human, and a broader notion of multiple cultures within the Christian and Catholic cultures, Gebara suggests that women are trying to deconstruct traditional theology to move beyond

³³ Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

the hierarchical and sexist structures of our inherited patriarchal religion.³⁴

Brueggemann argues that prophetic leadership emerges from those who deeply understand the tradition and have suffered as a result of power and wealth placing oppression in the hands of a few. In the biblical times about which Brueggemann directs his thesis, power resided in the monarchy and priests. In the Roman Catholic Church, however, power resides in the hierarchy. Teresa called for reformation of the hierarchy itself: “I have been and continue to be more inclined to live and work within structures as I call for change and transformation. For me, as a Roman Catholic Woman Priest, I know I am living outside of the traditional, hierarchical structure of the Church but only because of the inability of that traditional and hierarchical structure to live into its own highest good.”

Rodriguez and Fortier link tradition and culture. Like Brueggemann, they assert that “traditions pass on a world of meaning.”³⁵ They, like Gebara, place theological traditions in cultural contexts. They distinguish between the process of tradition, that is, the handing on of the tradition, and the product or the content. They are concerned with how “narratives, rituals, and historical and collective memories function as a human wall of resistance to annihilation and a means to ensure survival.”³⁶ What women priests have done challenges the content of the Roman Catholic tradition as well as its process. Together in community they resist the hierarchically claimed power to determine that males only can be ordained for priestly service to God and the community.

Early in the RCWP movement, theologians Iris Müller and Ida Raming named the resistance as *contra legem*. After the amendment to the Code of Canon Law that threatened anyone who talked about ordaining women would be threatened with punishment, they asked themselves: “How can Catholic women free themselves from this spiritual prison made up of definitive

³⁴ Gebara, 98.

³⁵ Jeanette Rodriguez, and Ted Fortier. *Cultural Memory. Resistance, Faith and Identity*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007) 9.

³⁶ Rodriguez, 8.

declarations and prohibitions?”³⁷ As priests, they write about their own commitment to pursue resistance and claimed a tradition that overruled the authority of the hierarchy. “We committed ourselves to Action Against Current Church Law [Canon 1024]. . . .For us the scripture provided the authoritative guidance ‘One must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29).’ ”³⁸ These two women described their ordination as a threshold. “Behind us was a path along which we had tortured ourselves with oppressive church law, against which we had struggled without effect. In front of us was a path free of this burden, but still presenting a very uncertain future. That we had now freed ourselves gave us an uplifted feeling and filled us with joy.”³⁹

Brueggemann contends that prophets must experience pain, which these women readily attest to enduring. He then argues that out of their pain, in collaboration with a community, they emerge in hope. The stories of the women we interviewed consistently reflected this movement. Indeed, they all ended with what Helen asserted: “no one can excommunicate me from G-d.” To a person, they have rejected the excommunication.

At the same time, they offer alternative ways of being church. Their commitment to systemic change results in public websites, multiple articles, books, and their universal willingness to be interviewed and documented. Women priests see themselves as critical yeast for the change in the Church they embody.⁴⁰

The renewed liturgies model in a symbolic way a new openness to recognizing Jesus, as Juanita claims *in persona Christi*. Maria describes her ordination to the diaconate as one of her most important and transforming spiritual experiences. As she lay prostrate before the altar and the Cross, she gave herself totally to G-d and to Jesus as disciple and leader of the Spirit’s people. She found herself transported to a unitive and mystical experience. She knew she was not dedicating herself to loyalty to an institution or a

³⁷ Müller and Raming, 73.

³⁸ Müller and Raming, 75.

³⁹ Müller and Raming, 77.

⁴⁰ Lederach, John Paul, *The Moral Imagination: the Art and Soul of Building Peace*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005) 91.

male hierarchy. She wasn't taking a vow of obedience to her female bishop. She was dedicating herself to G-d, and the people who came forward to lay hands on her to affirm her role acknowledged this very act of prophetic reform in the Catholic tradition.

Rites of women's ordination stand in stark contrast to the current ordination rite of male priests, during which the men prostrate themselves to the bishop and take a vow of obedience to the bishop. Ordination of women is an echo of the divine call to all the gathered, a call to holiness and full participation as the people of G-d. No longer, the ritual declares, does the fullness of faith reside in a single ordained religious leader assigned to a geographic location. Indeed, the faith is ever growing and developing as the people of G-d are pilgrims, disciples, learners of the person of Jesus, his parent, and the spirit that enlivens all.

These moves in language, ritual, and inclusiveness change the culture of the community. As Heifetz asserts:

The politics of inclusion are not faint-hearted efforts at making everybody happy enough. Inclusion means more than taking peoples' views into account in defining the problem. Inclusion may mean challenging people, hard and steadily, to face new perspectives on familiar problems, to let go of old ideas and ways of life long held sacred. Thus, inclusion does not mean that each party will get its way. Even the most well-crafted efforts at inclusion can rarely prevent the experience of loss by some. As a result, one often cannot shield oneself from the outrage of those parties who must face loss and are unwilling to change.⁴¹

Women priests and bishops intentionally implement rituals that signal a shift in organizational structures. They are standing firm in the face of hierarchical resistance. Christine and Suzanne, as bishops, speak about intentionally working with and educating

⁴¹ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership*, 239-40.

male bishops in the church. They claim prophetic obedience and note, in the words of Bishop Patricia Fresen, that the hierarchy can “jail the resisters but not the resistance.”⁴²

Summary

The majority of women we interviewed and studied lived through Vatican II and embraced its call to discipleship. Each heard a call to ordained priesthood, and for many years attempted to answer the call as described throughout. What they now offer is a type of leadership that rejects hierarchical, patriarchal obedience. Rather, they see themselves as facilitators, educators, and convenors; they accompany the people of G-d on their journeys of faith. These shifts demonstrate different styles of leadership and accountability.

Reform in the Roman Catholic Church takes time. It took 500 years for most of the reforms Luther called for in 1517 to become natural in the Roman Church.⁴³ These women recognize that reform comes within the organization as well as from outside it. Like leaders described by Helen Markham, these women link spirits and allow for the wonders that only a community of spirits can accomplish. They are committed to balancing individual and communal transformation.⁴⁴ They help their people “confront the contradictions in their lives and communities and adjust their values and behavior to accommodate new realities.”⁴⁵ They offer their communities a “sanctuary to restore a sense of purpose, regain courage and heart.”⁴⁶ They are full of mission, and free from their own fear of reprisal because they have faced that fear and accepted institutional consequences.

⁴² *Pink Smoke Over the Vatican: The voices of these women must be heard.* Directed by Jules Hart. Produced by Eye Goddess Films, 2011.

⁴³ *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.* Catholic Church’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation. 1999.

⁴⁴ Donna Markham, *Spiritlinking Leadership*, (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1999) ix.

⁴⁵ Heifetz, *Leadership*, 127-128.

⁴⁶ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership*, 273.

Standing on the shoulders of women and men who have gone before them, these priests “generate courage and the belief that as long as persons are connected and unified in single-minded commitment to the mission that is yet hazy and amorphous, the swirling and fuzzy vista ahead is filled with possibility and potential.”⁴⁷ Filled with the Spirit and sustained by practices that continue to deepen their spirituality, these female priests conform to the four tasks of the Gospel as delineated in the Acts of the Apostles. The very existence of these female priests encourages ecumenical collaboration and exchange, while acting as a prophetic witness to the change that is inevitable in a church that responds to the work of G-d in the People of G-d. Margaret Mead is quoted as having written, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

The determination of these women resounds with Jen’s words: “I love the Catholic Church. It is who I am. I will never leave.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Markham, 13.

⁴⁸ Luc Novovitch, *God’s Daughters: Knocking on Vatican’s Door*, documentary film (2015) <http://Godsdaughters.vhk.tv>

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