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## THE WOMEN'S ORDINATION MOVEMENT IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

Maureen Fiedler and Dolly Pomerleau

DURING THE TWENTIETH century, most Protestant and Jewish denominations accepted women as ministers, priests, and rabbis—even as bishops. But the Roman Catholic Church refused to do so, and that opposition led to the growth of a movement in North America for the ordination of women as priests. As that movement has grown in the last quarter century, the Vatican has become increasingly isolated in its refusal to ordain women and, in this struggle, has lost the hearts and minds of many of its own people.

The events of the years from 1975 to 2000 provided fertile soil for the growth of the Roman Catholic movement for women's ordination. During this quarter century, the growing shortage of male, celibate priests brought the issue home to people in the parishes.

The secular women's movement in North America has constantly raised public consciousness since the 1960s on the need for gender equality in the United States and worldwide. Issues widely covered in the public media include equal pay and benefits, the "glass ceiling" for promotions, domestic violence, sexual harassment, sexual slavery, reproductive rights, women's disproportionate poverty and illiteracy, "honor killings" of women in Asia, genital mutilation in Africa, and the exposure of women's plight in countries such as Afghanistan. Meanwhile, at United Nations-sponsored Conferences on Women, held every four years, the Vatican distinguished itself by attempting to stop progress on many aspects of women's rights. Proponents of women's ordination link forms of gender oppression, noting that a failure to ordain women implies that women are not full persons and tacitly supports all other forms of societal oppression of women.

The earliest movement for women's ordination in the Roman Catholic Church dawned in the early years of the twentieth century in Great Britain as intrepid women like the Pankhursts, leaders of the suffrage movement in England, staged bold public demonstrations for women's right to vote. That energy led a group of women to found St. Joan's Alliance as a Roman Catholic organization working for suffrage in 1911.

The banner of St. Joan's Alliance moved to the United States to participate in the struggle there for the right to vote. After suffrage was won in 1920, Alliance women moved on to other issues and eventually became interested in women's ordination. Just before Vatican Council II (1962–1965), a St. Joan's member in Ger-

many, Gertrud Heinzelmann, publicly challenged the Vatican's discriminatory policies and called for opening ordained ministries to women on an equal footing with men. But in the days before the Council met, St. Joan's Alliance's position was a fringe opinion, and it never grew beyond a small group.

The first signs of a large grassroots movement for women's ordination in the United States came in the mid-1970s. It was the natural offshoot of the secular feminist movement, struggling then for an Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. By then, the climate was ripe for a change. The theological ferment of Vatican Council II encouraged Church reformers. In 1962, a Dutch theologian, Haye van der Meer, published *Women Priests in the Catholic Church?* in which he argued that there is no scriptural barrier to women's ordination.

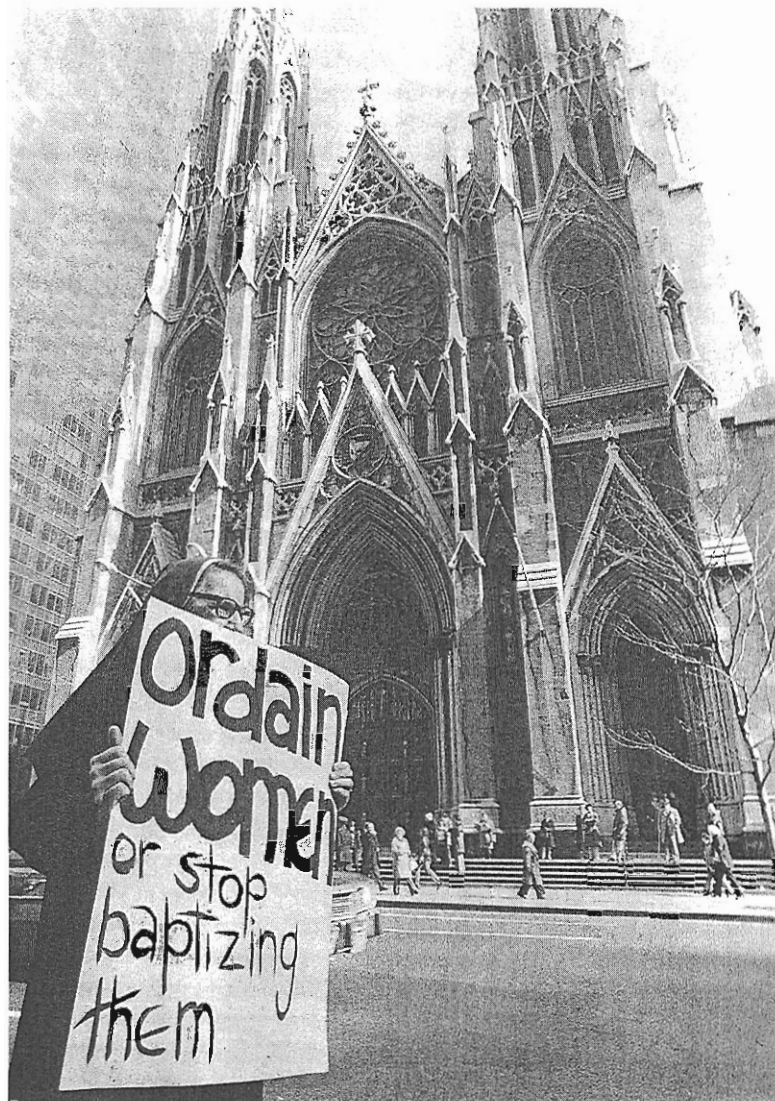
However, there were no women decision makers at the Vatican Council II, and the bishops of the world never discussed or debated the issue of women priests directly. But the Council created an aura that change in the Church was possible, even desirable. It emphasized the call of the Church to work for justice and approved a strong and unqualified statement in an official Council document: "[A]ny kind of social or cultural discrimination . . . on the grounds of sex . . . is to be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design" (Pope Paul II). The next sentence offered an encouraging example: "It is deeply to be deplored that these basic personal rights are not yet being respected everywhere, as is the case with women who are denied the chance freely to choose a husband, *or a state of life*" (Pope Paul II [emphasis added]).

With the reform of the liturgy, women began to join men as readers of scripture and ministers of the Eucharist in parishes across North America. Canon law treated them as "exceptions," but in actual practice, women soon became a common sight in these roles. The visual foundations for change were laid. Women could now be seen doing things done only by priests in years past.

The 1971 Synod of Bishops in Rome urged the Church to strengthen its credibility to preach social justice by implementing justice in the life of the Church community. Justice for women in the Church was an obvious starting point.

As theologians began to raise the question of women's ordination in the early 1970s, Archbishop John Quinn of San Francisco chaired a Committee on Pastoral Research and Practices of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB). Its report, titled "Theological Reflections on the Ordination of Women," cited the "constant teaching and practice of the Catholic Church against the ordination of women." But the report admitted that the question was complex, that it had

Since the 1960s, the secular women's movement in North America has raised public consciousness on the need for gender equality in the United States and worldwide. Proponents of women's ordination linked forms of gender oppression, noting that a failure to ordain women implies that women are not full persons and tacitly supports all other forms of societal oppression of women. Copyright © Bettye Lane Studios.



not yet been “thoroughly researched for Catholic theology,” and that no “authoritative teaching” settled the question. Many saw the latter phrases as an invitation to deeper theological probing and advocacy.

An event in the Episcopal Church moved Catholic advocates of women's ordination to begin organizing. In Philadelphia, three retired Episcopal bishops ordained eleven women in the Episcopal Church in 1974. These were “irregular” ordinations, valid but not lawful in the eyes of Episcopal Church authorities. The national media debate intensified the issue for Catholics. By 1976 the Episcopal Church “regularized” these ordinations, admitting women to the priesthood.

The United Nations' International Women's Year in 1975 saw public signs of Catholic organizing begin to appear. In July of that year, Rev. William R. Callahan founded Priests for Equality, an organization of Roman Catholic priests and deacons who endorsed a charter

calling for the equality of women and men in church and society, including the ordination of women. In the 1990s Priests for Equality contributed powerfully to the movement for women's rights in the Church by translating and publishing the scriptures, as well as the lectionaries for Mass, in gender-inclusive language.

Mary B. Lynch, a Catholic laywoman, took the next step by asking everyone on her 1974 Christmas card list if they thought it was time to ask publicly, “Should women be priests?” Thirty-one women and one man responded with a resounding “Yes!” This small group began planning what they envisioned as a small national meeting of like-minded people. “Women in Future Priesthood Now: A Call to Action” was held in Detroit, Michigan, in 1975 on Thanksgiving weekend. “So long as women are excluded from ordination,” said the sponsoring task force, “their participation in the sacramental life and ministry of the Church can only be secondary

and auxiliary, reflecting a theological view of them as diminished persons.”

The response of people across the United States and Canada overwhelmed the planners. Twice they were forced to move the conference to a larger site, and even then, some of the overflow crowd of 1,200 women and men had to watch the proceedings on closed circuit television from what they called their “upper room.” Five hundred registrations had been returned for lack of space.

Speakers explored the issue of women in the Church thoroughly. Elizabeth Carroll expounded many meanings of the phrase “the proper place of women in the church.” Rosemary Radford Ruether provided a critique of the patriarchal structures dominating women. Scripture scholars Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Carroll Stuhlmueller demonstrated that there are no scriptural barriers to women’s ordination. Margaret Farley called women’s ordination a “moral imperative” for the Church. Arlene Swidler offered “partnership marriage” as a model for a priesthood of equality, and speakers like Marjorie Tuite and William R. Callahan provided strategies for achieving the goal.

Other speakers at this historic assembly included George Tavard, Emily Clark Hewitt, Anne E. Carr, Rev. Richard McBrien, Marie Augusta Neal, Emily Clark Hewitt, Dorothy Donnelly, Eleanor Kahle, and Mary Daniel Turner. Mary Collins and Rosalie Muschal-Reinhardt led prayer services.

The closing ritual brought a hushed silence to the hall when all women called to priesthood were asked to stand and be blessed. Slowly, over several minutes, hundreds of women stood. The assembly was awed, and the movement was born.

The Detroit conference also produced one of the first signs of hierarchical resistance. Archbishop Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, then president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, issued a statement saying, “It is not correct to say that no serious theological obstacle stands in the way of ordaining women to the priesthood” (News statement, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, October 3, 1975).

Those in the young movement, energized by the Detroit Conference and hopeful that ordinations would occur within their lifetimes, did not expect instant institutional acceptance. An organization formally called the “Women’s Ordination Conference” was founded in 1976 to carry on the work begun in Detroit. The first Core Commission, the governing body of the new group, met in June 1976. Recognizing the structures of ministry in the Church as part of the problem, the organization defined its goal as the “ordination of Roman Catholic women to a *renewed* priestly ministry.”

The United States Bishops convened the Call to Action Conference in Detroit that same year as a com-

memoration of the U.S. bicentennial. This gathering, which followed widespread hearings at the grassroots level, became a surprisingly adventurous national consultation. The delegates, of whom 93 percent were either appointees of bishops or bishops themselves, called on the American bishops to facilitate the formation of a “more fully developed position on the ordination of women to sacred orders.” Delegates listed what the study must include: the rights and needs of the community, the action of the Holy Spirit, interpretive study of the human sciences, experiences of other Christian churches, contemporary biblical exegesis, as well as pontifical and episcopal statements. The study was to involve lay- and religious women, especially “women who believe themselves called to priesthood” (Call to Action: *Recommendations on Church*, II, 2).

Ironically, the Pontifical Biblical Commission already had a study under way, and its 1976 report to Pope Paul VI stated, “It does not seem that the New Testament by itself alone will permit us to settle in a clear way and once and for all the problem of the possible accession of women to the presbyterate” (“Biblical Commission Report: Can Women Be Priests?”).

### Arguments Advanced for Women’s Ordination

Speakers at the Detroit Women’s Ordination Conference advanced several arguments in favor of the ordination of women. Theologians and activists refined these arguments as the movement matured. The most prominent include these:

The Christian theology of the human person teaches that women are full human persons, made in the image of God and equal to men. Vatican Council II is cited frequently:

All women and men are . . . created in God’s image; they have the same nature and origin and, being redeemed by Christ, . . . there is here a basic equality between all . . . any kind of social or cultural discrimination in basic personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language or religion, must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God’s design. It is deeply to be deplored that these basic personal rights are not yet being respected everywhere, as is the case with women who are denied the chance freely to choose a husband, or a *state of life*. (Pope Paul II, chapter 2, emphasis added)

Without women in the priesthood, Christ is imaged in an incomplete way. The Vatican maintains that women cannot image Jesus in the priesthood. Women’s ordination activists turn that argument on its head noting that, in Catholic theology, Christ assumed, and re-

deemed, *humanity*, not maleness. Both women *and* men can image Christ, and the Church needs both genders to represent the fullness of humanity.

Limiting ordination to men limits God and sacralizes masculinity. Catholic theology teaches that God is beyond knowing. Language is merely a tool to image a God who cannot be expressed in images. To make God literally "male" is to confuse the essence of God with a word image. To say God cannot call women as well as men limits God's will. To make the maleness of Jesus a controlling element in imaging him is to confuse Jesus' maleness, which is *incidental*, with his humanity, which is *fundamental* to his redemptive role.

Catholic teaching on justice demands the elimination of oppressive discrimination. Women, much more than men, suffer from poverty, illiteracy, violence, and even death *because* they are women. Advocates of women priests maintain that a church that denies ordination to women participates in this sin because it sanctifies the system of sexist thought that underlies these pervasive injustices worldwide.

Jesus modeled gender equality in his dealings with women. He called both women and men to ministry, commissioning Mary of Magdala to preach, for example. He did not "ordain" anyone, men or women. The notion of priesthood evolved over time; it was not until the second or third century that it began to resemble what we know today. The twelve apostles were symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel, Jesus' way of saying that all Jews were a part of his New Covenant. The Last Supper was a Jewish Passover Seder, a family meal, which usually included women and children.

Ordaining women reflects the finest Catholic tradition, too long buried. Scripture tells us that women were deacons, preachers, missionaries, and leaders of the early Church. New research shows that women in early centuries led house churches and presided at the table of the Eucharist, roles we now understand as priestly.

The faithful support the ordination of women, and the pastoral needs of the Church today demand it. The "canonical doctrine of reception," an ancient part of Catholic tradition, says that, for a law to be an effective guide for the believing community, it must be "received" by that community. The male-only priesthood is no longer a "received" doctrine. Polls in the United States, Canada, and Europe have shown consistently that 62 to 71 percent of all Catholics favor women priests. Moreover, there is a severe and worsening shortage of male, celibate priests. Catholics often ask, "Isn't the Eucharist more important than a male-only priesthood?"

### The First Papal "No"

In January 1977 Pope Paul VI issued *Inter Insigniores*, the *Vatican Declaration against the Ordination of Women*,

laying the groundwork for all future official opposition by asserting that women cannot "image Christ" in the priesthood and that both scripture and the constant tradition of the Church forbid the ordination of women.

This document galvanized the fledgling movement. Public reaction was swift and stormy. While the U.S. bishops officially praised the *Declaration*, theologians like Karl Rahner and John Donohue wrote articles dissenting from virtually every section of the *Declaration*. Catholic feminists were outraged, and under the leadership of the newly formed Women's Ordination Conference, they organized demonstrations in front of cathedrals and diocesan offices nationwide. A group of theologians and leaders of the women's ordination movement held a press conference to denounce the document, calling it antiwoman and without theological credibility. The Quixote Center, a national faith-based center working on issues of justice in church and society, commissioned a Gallup Survey in February and March 1977. It measured the rapid change of Catholic opinion in the two months following the *Declaration* when public debate was the hottest. It used the question first employed by noted sociologist Andrew Greeley in a 1974 study, asking agreement or disagreement with this question: "It would be a good thing if women were allowed to be ordained as priests."

In 1974, 29 percent of Catholics agreed with this statement. By February 1977, it was 31 percent, but in only one month, it jumped 10 percentage points, to 41 percent. The Vatican was on a losing trajectory with Catholic public opinion. Professional surveys in the 1990s consistently reported that between 62 percent and 67 percent of U.S. Catholics support women's ordination.

Meanwhile, the Women's Ordination Conference launched Project Priesthood, a study of women who felt called to ordination. This 1978 survey revealed that 65 percent were nuns and 35 percent laywomen, a trend reversed twenty years later.

In response to repeated assertions that women were not psychologically suited to be priests, a sociopsychological study of a sample of these women, conducted by Fran Ferder, compared them to a sample of men studying for the priesthood. The findings, published in *Called to Break Bread* (1978), found that the women were *better* qualified than their male counterparts.

Official opposition met with righteous anger, spurring growth in movement participation, as well as Women's Ordination Conference membership. The Core Commission of the Women's Ordination Conference laid plans for a second conference on the ordination of women in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1978 with the theme of "New Woman, New Church, New Priestly Ministry." Dolly Pomerleau, a founding mother of the Women's Ordination Conference, coordinated the event.

The flyer advertising the gathering proclaimed boldly, "It's time to lay to rest the heresy that women cannot image Jesus in the priesthood."

That conference was larger than the previous one in Detroit, with more than 2,000 participants, and it began not with polite speeches but with a demonstration in the streets. Participants, carrying large silver styrofoam chains, started at Baltimore's Inner Harbor. They spilled into the streets chanting, "Burst the chains that oppress, and forge the chains that free!"

The Baltimore Conference advanced the movement by linking the evils of sexism with those of racism, classism, and social justice. Featured speakers, from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Europe, demonstrated that the issue was not limited to North America. The conference raised publicly an issue that had been an ongoing debate in the movement from the beginning, namely: Should women accept ordination in the system as it exists or refuse ordination until Church structures underwent thorough change and renewal?

Some conference participants challenged the idea of a male-led liturgy. Although the majority of conference participants went to the official Eucharistic celebration, a small group broke off and held a women-led Eucharist.

After that conference, a group of women gathered up some of the silver styrofoam chains that had served as the conference symbol and drove to Washington, D.C., where the National Conference of Catholic Bishops was holding its annual meeting. When the women made their presence known, the Bishops' Committee on Women in the Church invited them to a meeting. Bishop Maurice Dingman of Des Moines, Iowa, stood on the floor of the Bishops' Conference and called for dialogue on the issue of women priests.

In 1979 a small group of bishops met several times to engage in a dialogue with movement representatives in what Rosemary Radford Ruether later called "a non-meeting of the minds." After one particularly frustrating session, Marjorie Tuite lamented, "They don't want us, they never wanted us, they are never going to want us ordained." At one point the women actually walked out and boycotted the meetings for a day. The talks resumed and continued for three years. Although they produced no structural or policy changes, the dialogue had a strong impact on participating bishops.

That same year, the newly elected Pope John Paul II visited the United States for the first time. In Washington, D.C., three women held an all-night vigil outside the Vatican Embassy. The next morning, Women's Ordination Conference coordinator Ruth Fitzpatrick, holding a lighted candle, greeted the pope in his motorcade by shouting the words, "Ordain Women!" Throughout his visit in Washington, D.C., protesters followed the

pope with banners saying in Polish, "Sexism Is a Sin. Repent."

When the pope reached the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception to speak to an audience of nuns, Sister of Mercy Theresa Kane, then the head of her order and the president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, greeted him with a gentle but firm and unmistakable message. She called for the recognition of "women as persons" in *all* the ministries of the Church. In a separately organized action, thirty nuns wearing blue armbands stood in protest during the entire ceremony at the Shrine. These events, and especially the speech of Theresa Kane, saturated the media for days. The pope rejected all pleas, but public debate on women's ordination reached a crescendo. As before, polls showed that Vatican opposition only strengthened the movement for women's ordination.

### Women's Ordination Conference (WOC)

The leading organization in the movement has been the Women's Ordination Conference. In its first days, the office consisted of a card table, a chair, and a file cabinet in a back room of the Quixote Center in Mt. Rainier, Maryland. Its first national coordinator was Ruth Fitzpatrick. Within a year, she moved to a small office in the Mt. Pleasant area of Washington, D.C. Throughout the years, the office has been located in Rochester, New York, and New York City. Its national coordinators have included Ruth Fitzpatrick, Joan Sobala, Rosalie Muschal-Reinhardt, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Fidelis McDonough, Marsie Silvestro, Dolly Pomerleau, Duffy McDermott, Maureen Fiedler, Andrea Johnson, Deborah Halter, and Genevieve Chavez.

When Ruth Fitzpatrick took the helm as national coordinator for the second time in the mid-1980s, she moved the national headquarters to Fairfax, Virginia, first to her own home, then into a second-story office over a shopping center. During her tenure, Fitzpatrick became a well-known figure in the media, responding strongly and consistently to the negative statements of the bishops and the Vatican.

Early on, the Women's Ordination Conference launched its newsletter, *New Women, New Church*. Staff traveled around the country, meeting with supporters and helping organize locally. Money was always scarce, but interest, membership, and funding surged upward every time there was a papal visit or another official document denying ordination to women once again.

The Women's Ordination Conference has sponsored public hearings on women in the Church, retreats, workshops and speeches, and a regular program of demonstrations outside churches where men are being ordained as priests. Members performed public Holy Thursday foot-washings, remembering Jesus' washing

the disciples' feet at the Last Supper and his call to servant leadership. Demonstrators once wore blue armbands (the traditional color associated with Mary the mother of Jesus) but now favor the purple stole, adopted from the European movement by North Americans in the 1990s. The stole is the sign of priesthood, and the purple signifies mourning that women are barred from ordination. The Women's Ordination Conference has consistently encouraged its members to write letters to bishops and the media, to call in to talk shows, to lobby local bishops, and even to "Take a Bishop to Breakfast."

While the Women's Ordination Conference remained a focus for organizing around the women's ordination issue, a group of organizations called the "Women of the Church Coalition" met frequently to discuss a wide range of issues affecting women's status in the Church. Women's ordination was part of the agenda, but not all. Inclusive language and symbol, hierarchical structures, women's liturgies, social justice generally, reproductive rights, and gay/lesbian rights were also issues of concern. Small worshipping groups formed around the country, and women often celebrated Mass without a priest. That coalition evolved into "Women Church Convergence," and the group held its first conference in Chicago in 1983.

Both the Chicago Conference and a larger Cincinnati Women-Church Conference in 1987 addressed the question of women priests, but only as part of larger questions that included a fundamental critique of patriarchy and church governance, women-led liturgies, and all women's rights in Church and civil society.

The Women Church Convergence held its third conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1993. This time, the gathering was interfaith in scope and explored questions ranging from women in Christian ministry to Goddess worship. Few speakers touched the ordination of Roman Catholic women.

Meanwhile, in the 1980s and 1990s, many Church reform organizations added women's ordination to their agendas or were founded with that issue at the core. These included Catholics Speak Out, the Call to Action, FutureChurch, the Eighth Day Center for Justice, and CORPUS (the National Association for a Married Priesthood). In Church reform circles, women's ordination became a "settled" issue at the core of the demands for change.

Ordination Revisited, a small conference in St. Louis sponsored by the Women's Ordination Conference in 1984, brought together women who felt called to ordination. About 200 attended, and the conference led to the formation of RAPPORT, a group of "women called" who have met regularly ever since for prayer, solidarity, and strategy.

New research appeared in 1990–1991 that called into

question the Vatican assertion that the Church had never "ordained" women. Giorgio Otranto, an Italian scholar, published his interpretation of icons found in the catacombs, icons that include frescos of women performing priestly functions. Mary Ann Rossi, an expert in classical studies, translated his work into English. Otranto, sponsored by the Women's Ordination Conference, lectured in the United States in October 1991, including the Catholic University of America. His findings received wide media attention.

The Vatican made a small concession in the early 1980s to the growing clamor for gender equality in the Church by permitting bishops to decide for their own dioceses whether or not women or girls might be altar servers. The vast majority of bishops in the United States approved, confirming a practice that had become commonplace. Recognizing that this was only a baby step toward its goal, the Women's Ordination Conference hailed the move nonetheless.

The U.S. bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Women in Society and in the Church initiated a *Pastoral Letter on Women's Concerns* in the early 1990s. They began by holding public hearings held around the country. Hundreds of women testified. "Don't write about women; write about sexism," said the women of the ordination movement. "Sexism is the problem."

The first draft reflected many of the women's diverse voices, but the Vatican intervened in the process. The *Pastoral*, intended by the bishops of the United States to be an official statement of policy on women's issues, went through four drafts in two years, each becoming progressively more conservative than the last. The final and fourth draft emphatically opposed the ordination of women.

The movement organized to stop its passage. The Women's Ordination Conference, Catholics Speak Out, Priests for Equality, Call to Action, and other groups spoke out strongly against it. A national campaign was launched that included heavy grassroots lobbying of bishops, a four-page signature ad in the *National Catholic Reporter*, and multiple press releases. Just months prior to the vote, in what was believed to be a highly influential factor in the outcome, Catholics Speak Out/Quixote Center released a Gallup poll showing that 67 percent of Catholics in the United States favored the ordination of women. In one of the first victories of the ordination movement, the bishops failed to achieve the required two-thirds vote and defeated the *Pastoral* at their November 1992 annual meeting.

Officials in Rome decided it was time to stifle the growing dissent. They began to take action against individuals and to make stronger pronouncements in an effort to quell the public support for women's ordination.

The Society of Jesus dismissed a longtime advocate of women's ordination, Rev. William R. Callahan, in 1991. Although women's ordination was not specifically mentioned in his dismissal, Jesuit officials declared that his life and preaching touched "every neuralgic issue" of the Church, and women's ordination was clearly such an issue.

Pope John Paul II issued *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994), or what became known as the "Papal No" to women's ordination. This document repeated the teachings of *Inter Insignores* but added that the teaching was "definitive" and not open to discussion. Theologians and the women's ordination movement sharply criticized the document, disputing especially the idea that so new a teaching could be "definitive."

With public discussion continuing in spite of *Ordinatio*, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, issued the Vatican's *Responsum Ad Dubium* in 1995, responding to supposed "doubts" about the teaching. *Responsum* said that the all-male priesthood is part of the infallibility of the ordinary magisterium of the Church. Leaders of the movement, alarmed by use of the word "infallibility," denounced the document. They made it clear that this teaching did not meet the standards for infallible declarations, that it was far from being "received" by the faithful, and that—in any event—Cardinal Ratzinger was not the pope.

Carmel McEnroy was fired from St. Meinrad's Seminary in Indiana in 1995 because she had signed an ad in the *National Catholic Reporter* calling for dialogue on the issue of women priests. Then the Vatican ordered the British publisher of Lavinia Byrne's book *Woman at the Altar* to destroy all remaining copies. Byrne eventually left her religious congregation. Her book was republished by New York Continuum in 1998.

With Vatican opposition intensifying, the Women's Ordination Conference was determined to tell the world that advocates of women's ordination would not be silent. A 20th Anniversary National Conference was held in Crystal City, Virginia, officially titled "Gathering '95: Discipleship of Equals, Breaking Bread/Doing Justice."

A split in the movement became evident at this public event, which drew approximately 1,000 participants. Speakers such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argued that ordination was no longer a desirable goal because the Roman Catholic Church was hopelessly patriarchal. She urged direct work toward a "discipleship of equals" in women-church. Others, such as Maureen Fiedler, while agreeing that the "discipleship of equals" was the ultimate and desired goal, believed that women must seek ordination in order to challenge the institution and the patriarchal order and leverage other structural changes in the Church. As many conference participants

expressed doubt about the Women's Ordination Conference's commitment to its mission, the organization's board of directors reaffirmed its historic goal, the ordination of women to a renewed priestly ministry.

### International Ties Are Forged

Meanwhile, fresh activities in Europe reenergized the movement in the United States. Sponsors of a *Petition of the People of God* in Austria and Germany gathered more than 2.3 million signatures for "five points" of Church reform, one of which was the ordination of Roman Catholic women as priests and deacons. This led to the founding of the International We Are Church Movement in 1997 at a meeting in Rome. Women's ordination was a prominent part of the agenda. In 1998, at an unprecedented demonstration in St. Peter's Square with more than 500 participants from seventeen countries, including the United States, a petition with the "five points"—one being women's ordination—was presented to Vatican officials, who graciously received them and promptly ignored them.

Delegates from the United States, attending the first European Women's Synod in Gmunden, Austria, joined with European and Latin American women to found Women's Ordination Worldwide (WOW) in 1996. They included Andrea Johnson, national coordinator of the Women's Ordination Conference, Jeremy Daigler, Maureen Fiedler, Suzanne Polen, and Dolly Pomerleau. WOW held the first international Women's Ordination Conference in Dublin, Ireland, in June–July 2001.

While the movement in North America and Europe was still the dream of a few in 1970, an event unknown in the West occurred in utmost secrecy in Czechoslovakia when it was under communist rule. The implications were far-reaching. On December 28, 1970, a laywoman named Ludmila Javorova lay prostrate on the floor of an upper room as Bishop Felix Davidek, a Catholic bishop in good standing, ordained her to the Roman Catholic priesthood to minister to the persecuted underground Church of that time. She carried on her ministry in secret for twenty years, serving even as vicar general of the underground diocese. In this same period, a number of married men were ordained to the priesthood to serve the persecuted Church.

The *New York Times* (December 8, 1991) revealed Ludmila's ordination, and Cardinal Miroslav Vlk of Prague admitted that Ludmila Javorova was but one of four to six unidentified women ordained for the underground Church. He characterized these ordinations as invalid. Javorova has made clear in numerous interviews and talks that she regards herself a bona fide priest. An unknown number of women were ordained to the di-

aconate. None of these women has made her story public.

Following the *New York Times* story, the Women's Ordination Conference organized a delegation of four women to go to the Czech Republic and search for Javorova. Dolly Pomerleau, Martha Ann Kirk, Carolyn Moynihan, and Ruth Fitzpatrick located Javorova and met with her and many others from the underground Church. Later, in her modest apartment, they heard her incredible and touching story into the early hours of the morning.

Under the sponsorship of the Women's Ordination Conference and Catholics Speak Out, Javorova came to the United States for a visit in 1997. She spoke to small groups in Cleveland, Ohio, New Jersey, and the Baltimore/Washington metropolitan area, affirming her priesthood at every gathering. She refused to grant any interviews with the media. After that trip, Javorova began collaborating with Miriam Therese Winter on a book about her life and the story of the Czech underground Church. It was published in 2001 by Crossroad of New York (*Out of the Depths, the Story of Ludmila Javorova Ordained Roman Catholic Priest*, by Miriam Therese Winter).

### New Strategies in the New Millennium

New strategies began to appear in the new century. Chicago activists noted that the archdiocese of Chicago had begun a billboard campaign throughout the city to attract male candidates to the priesthood. Mirroring the archdiocesan slogan, the women created their own billboard and placed signs in the city's rapid transit system. The billboard, with a Roman collar like that used by the archdiocesan ad, read, "You're waiting for a sign from God? *This* is it! Ordain women." Media attention was instantaneous and intense. Soon the campaign spilled over into Milwaukee. Church officials were stung and responded, saying that theological debate cannot be conducted through billboards.

Many in the movement became aware that its members were graying. Most were of the Vatican II generation who remembered the excitement of change and experimentation in the 1960s and 1970s. And so the Women's Ordination Conference founded the Young Feminist Network in 1996 to attract younger people to the movement.

Under the leadership of Andrea Johnson, the Women's Ordination Conference renewed its study of women called to be priests and released its findings to the media in 1999. They showed that such women are not "radicals on the fringe of the institution. They are mature, well-educated regular churchgoers active in their faith communities. More than half are employed

by the institutional church." The study called them "benevolent subversives." In a complete reversal from the earlier study, 75 percent were laywomen and the balance nuns (Fiedler and Schwartz).

During the quarter-century since 1975, leaders and activists of the Women's Ordination Conference often discussed the question of "just doing it," that is, finding a bishop or bishops who would catapult over the regulations and actually ordain some Roman Catholic women, much as the Episcopalians had done in 1974. The issue began to gel more firmly in 1998 in Rochester, New York. Here an entire parish, then called "Corpus Christi," was expelled from the diocese over issues that included a prominent place for women at the Eucharistic table. Kevin McKenna, chancellor of the Diocese of Rochester, announced that the community had excommunicated itself, but the parish continued to consider itself Catholic.

The parish of more than 1,000 resettled itself in rented facilities and named itself Spiritus Christi. Many parishioners wanted to call two parish leaders, Mary Ramerman and Denise Donato, to serve the parish as priests, thus responding to an interior call felt by both women. As a first step, the parish sponsored a women's ordination conference in June 2000, attended by more than 200 people, to address the question. After the conference, the parish formally called the women and began to search for a bishop to perform the ordinations. They found Bishop Peter Hickman of the Old Catholic Church, a group that broke away from Rome in the nineteenth century but claims valid apostolic succession for its bishops. Bishop Hickman ordained Mary Ramerman in 2001 and Denise Donato in 2003. For Spiritus Christi, these were courageous and groundbreaking acts, firsts for a Catholic parish in the United States.

The first conference of Women's Ordination Worldwide in Dublin, Ireland, in June–July 2001, attended by 350 people from twenty-six countries and five continents, once again raised the issue to public consciousness, due largely to interventions from Rome. The Vatican forbade Myra Poole, a nun who was the conference organizer, to attend, but she came anyway. Roman officials also made unsuccessful attempts to bar Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister from presenting her keynote speech. Resolutions passed at the conference showed strong international commitment to the ordination of women.

In the summer of 2002, more "irregular" ordinations took place in Europe. Two bishops with claims to apostolic succession ordained seven women on a boat on the Danube River. There were three Germans—Ida Raming, Iris Mueller, and Gisela Forster; three Austrians—Christina Mayr-Lumetzberger, Adelinde Theresia Roitinger, and Pia Brunner. One was Austrian Ameri-



can—Dagmar Celeste. In 2003, Catholics Speak Out and the Women's Ordination Conference sponsored a coast-to-coast speaking tour of the United States for Ida Raming and Iris Mueller, during which they encouraged women who feel called to follow their example.

At the dawn of the third millennium, "just doing it," albeit irregularly, is gaining a foothold in the United States. At the same time, more theologians and activists on all continents are joining the movement for women's ordination. It is a movement that promises to continue until Roman Catholicism finally joins other Christian churches in accepting women fully in all its ministries.

### The Women's Ordination Movement in Canada

Several different Canadian organizations have addressed the issue of women's ordination in different ways over the last thirty years. Marie-Andree Roy, Monique Dumais, and Louise Melançon founded l'Autre Parole (The Other Word) in the province of Quebec in 1976. They describe themselves as a group of Christian feminists, but they have no position on the ordination of women because of a fundamental disagreement over whether or not women should accept ordination in this patriarchal church. They publish a bulletin four times a year.

Thirty women from across Canada met in Toronto in 1981 and founded Canadian Catholics for Women's Ordination. Four theology students, Ellen Leonard, Alexina Murphy, Bernadette McMahon, and Judy Maier, were the principal initiators.

Realizing the interconnectedness of issues that women face in Church and society, the organization changed its name to Catholic Network for Women's Equality in 1988. The mission statement of the Catholic Network reflects this broad vision, and it guides the organization's strategy and program. It reads: "To enable women to name their giftedness, and from that awareness to effect structural change in the church that reflects the mutuality and co-responsibility of women and men within the church."

The organization sponsors an annual conference in a different city each year, and that gathering reflects the needs, interests, and concerns of its members. Local groups also sponsor retreat days and other events.

Femmes et Ministères (Women and Ministry) was founded in 1982 in the Province of Quebec. The organization works to improve the situation of women in the Church and educate the official Church about women's issues. It is committed to obtaining the recognition of all women's ministries in the Church and to eliminating all types of discrimination to which women are subjected.

Communication in this vast but sparsely populated

country has been a challenge resolved largely through email, chat-rooms, and Web communications that enable women isolated in one part of the country to communicate with other like-minded women.

### The Women's Ordination Movement in Mexico

There is no formal women's ordination "movement" in Mexico, but in the years since the Vatican Declaration against the Ordination of Women, there have been isolated voices calling for the full equality of women in the ordained ministries of the Church. In a country suffering from economic underdevelopment, the call for gender equality in ministry is usually part of a larger quest for social justice and for the equal treatment of women in economic life.

Groups such as Mujeres por el Dialogo (Women for Dialogue) and Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir (Catholics for the Right to Decide) have raised the ordination issue publicly but sporadically as part of a broader agenda of social justice and, in the case of Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir, a call for women's right to reproductive choice. The latter group is part of Movimiento Internacional Somos Iglesia (International We Are Church Movement), a worldwide coalition of Church reform groups calling for five major changes in the Church, including the ordination of women.

**SOURCES:** Official church documents on women's ordination are available through the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops or on the Web at <http://www.womenpriests.org/>. This Web site, created by Dutch theologian John Winjgaards, contains the largest compendium of literature on women's ordination, pro and con, on the Web. See also Pope Paul II, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: *Gaudium et Spes*," [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/index.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm); "Biblical Commission Report: Can Women Be Priests?" <http://www.womanpriest.org/classic/append2.htm>; and Maureen Fiedler and Karen Schwartz, *Benevolent Subversives* (1999). Most theological work for women's ordination was done in the 1970s. Classic works include Haye van der Meer's *Women Priests in the Catholic Church?* (1973); George Tavard's *Woman in Christian Tradition* (1973); and Carroll Stuhlmueller's *Women and Priesthood: Future Directions* (1978). Compendia of important essays include Anne Marie Gardner's chronicle of the Detroit Women's Ordination Conference, *Women and Catholic Priesthood* (1976); the Proceedings of the Second Women's Ordination Conference in Baltimore, *New Woman, New Church, New Ministry* (1978); and Leonard and Arlene Swidler's *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration* (1977). By the early 1980s, most theologians believed that the issue was "settled" in favor of women's ordination, even if Rome did not recognize the fact. The scholarly conversation then shifted from "ordination" to "ministry" in a broad sense. Feminist scholars such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Mary

Hunt, Elizabeth Johnson, Diana Hayes, and Ada María Isasi-Díaz led the discussion in numerous theological works. The 1990s brought fresh historical and anthropological insights to the issue. Karen Jo Torjensen's *When Women Were Priests* (1993) showed that women did indeed fill priestly roles in the early centuries of Christianity. The work of archeologist Giorgio Otranto of Italy bolstered that conclusion with iconographic evidence. See "Notes on the Female Priesthood in Antiquity," translated from Italian in *Priesthood, Precedent and Prejudice: On Recovering the Women Priests of Early Christianity* in Mary Ann Rossi, "Priesthood, Precedent and Prejudice: On Recovering the Women Priests of Early Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies* 7 (1991): 73-94.

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## JEWISH WOMEN'S ORDINATION

Pamela S. Nadell

IN 1889, ON the front page of Philadelphia's *Jewish Exponent*, the writer Mary M. Cohen (1854-1911) asked, "Could not—our women—be ministers?" (Nadell, 1). That question launched a century-long debate over Jewish women's right to ordination. Not until 1972 did the first American woman shatter the historic tradition of an exclusively male rabbinate, and then women became rabbis only in Reform Judaism. Thereafter, the battle over women's ordination continued—and continues today in Orthodox Judaism.

When Cohen first raised the idea of women rabbis, she did so against the backdrop of the nineteenth-century woman's rights movement. Although best known for demanding woman suffrage, the vote women won in 1920, the Seneca Falls Convention's *Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions* in 1848 railed against men for excluding women from the learned professions—from medicine, law, and the ministry. During the nineteenth century a few women managed to break into these professions, becoming the first female doctors, lawyers, and clergy. In the 1850s Antoinette Brown Blackwell and in the 1880s Anna Howard Shaw challenged their churches and became the first women ministers in, respectively, the Congregational Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church Conference. Thus, American Jews joined their Protestant neighbors as they turned to the problem of ordaining women.

In the 1890s the question Cohen raised swirled beyond Philadelphia. In particular, it struck a chord among those in the most liberal Jewish denomination, Reform Judaism. As Reform developed in the nineteenth century, its leaders often proclaimed their intention of emancipating women in the synagogue. Thus Reform rabbis were the first to break, in 1851 in Albany, New York, with the custom of seating men and women separately during worship, and Reform Jews celebrated this as evidence of their progressive stance on women. Con-

templating women in the rabbinate, therefore, seemed consistent with Reform's championing new religious rights for women.

Not surprisingly, then, some girls and women found their way into classes at Hebrew Union College (HUC), the Reform rabbinical seminary established in Cincinnati in 1875, but none seems to have been considered a serious candidate for ordination. In the 1890s California's Ray Frank (Litman, 1861-1948) won acclaim for her lay preaching, teaching, and leading religious services. The press nicknamed her "the girl rabbi of the golden west" and asked her: "What would you do if you were a rabbi?" (39).

In 1897, in a Reform Jewish newspaper, twenty-six prominent American Jewish women weighed whether or not women should occupy the pulpit. Fifteen could imagine exemplary women, properly trained, as rabbis. Nine believed that not only did a woman's essential nature deny her this calling but that when "the crowning jewel of woman, motherhood, comes to bless her," the woman rabbi would find the struggle to balance family and career far too difficult (52). Nevertheless, Hannah Solomon (1858-1942), the founding president of the National Council of Jewish Women and a Reform Jew, boasted: "We are receiving every possible encouragement from our rabbis, and should women desire to enter the ministry, there will be no obstacles thrown in their way" (45).

Yet where were the women who wanted to be rabbis in the 1890s and early twentieth century? The Jewish women Mary M. Cohen claimed only needed a bit of encouragement to become rabbis have not left their names for the historical record. But after World War I women seeking ordination left a trail for the historian to follow, as they drove the debate about women rabbis from the realm of the abstract to the actual.

The first was Martha Neumark (Montor, 1904-1981). At fourteen, Neumark, the daughter of Hebrew Union College Professor David Neumark, became a student at the seminary. There she studied Bible and Hebrew, rabbinics, and Jewish history. In 1921, she asked the college for a high holiday pulpit. Every fall, scattered Jewish communities all over America, too small to host a permanent rabbi, called rabbinical students to lead them in prayer on the holiest days of the Jewish calendar, the New Year (Rosh Hashanah) and the Day of the Atonement (Yom Kippur). When Neumark asked for the same opportunity her male classmates had, a high holiday position, she raised the question of what would happen if she actually completed the nine-year rabbinical course. Would HUC ordain her a rabbi?

For the next two years, college faculty, alumni, and trustees debated the issue. Delving into the classical texts of Jewish tradition, scholars lined up on opposite sides, shaping the lines of the debate that would, in decades

# Encyclopedia of **Women and Religion** in North America



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## VOLUME 2

Part V. Women in Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Traditions

Part VI. Judaism

Part VII. Islam

Part VIII. Asian Religions

Part IX. Newer Religious Movements

Part X. Multidenominational Movements

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