

**CROSSROADS**  
**Women priests in the Roman Catholic Church\***

**Victoria Rue, Ph.D.**

Lincoln Theological Institute for the Study of Religion and Society,  
University of Manchester, UK

July 12-14, 2006

I am a Roman Catholic woman priest. My priesthood is valid but illicit. I have no parish. I have no officially sanctioned ministry. I am “contra legem” --against the law.

For the last four months I have been presiding at two weekly Masses and healing services at San Jose State University where I teach. Students, faculty and staff attend as well as people from the larger community. On Sundays I co-preside with Don Cordero a married priest and two women deacons.<sup>1</sup> We celebrate these liturgies in a non-denominational chapel---on the university campus. It’s a liminal space where the possible becomes a reality. A short time after we began these liturgies, the Roman Catholic bishop of San Jose issued a statement in every parish bulletin. A friend emailed it to me: “Victoria Rue is not a validly ordained priest of the Roman Catholic Church. Members of the Roman Catholic Church should not participate in celebrations of the sacraments that are conducted by Victoria Rue, as those celebrations are not in union with the local or universal

---

\* I am indebted to Bishop Patricia Fresen, Olivia Doko and Jean Marchant for their editorial comments on this paper.

<sup>1</sup> Since 2006, my ministries include: presiding at a monthly Eucharist with the Sophia Catholic Community, Santa Cruz, CA; presiding weekly at a Eucharist with students at SJSU; a monthly county jail ministry; teaching at SJSU; theatre writing and directing. For more information please see my website: <http://www.victoriarue.com>

Church.”<sup>2</sup> I requested dialog with the bishop. It was refused. But we go on-- the liturgies, the healings, the witness-- serving the people of God, answering the call of the majority of Roman Catholics in the USA who want women priests.

I am keenly aware that my Protestant sister ministers have been at this a lot longer and yet continue to encounter hierarchy and sexism daily. Where my experience might be different is in being “contra legem,” As women priests we create our ministries on the margins of the official church. We remain Roman Catholic. And we are not schismatic.

In North America, as well as Europe, we are at a beginning stage, we are developing our networks, our infrastructures of support. Two months ago Roman Catholic Womenpriests-USA (RCWP-USA) became a non-profit organization. We have a website [www.romancatholicwomenpriests.org](http://www.romancatholicwomenpriests.org)

As Roman Catholic women priests, we live inside the not yet, right now. Each of us is passionate about re-imagining our church. At the same time, we also hold within us the struggle to balance the old with the new. Thus, we are a crossroads for the past, and present—pointing to the future. The crossroads look like this: as women priests, we hold within us the beauty of our Roman Catholic spiritual traditions; we also hold within us as Roman Catholic women the effects of the church’s long patriarchal abuse and suffocation of women; yet we also hold within us a clear vision of returning the church to its origins of inclusivity and relationship; and yet, we hold

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dsj.org> website for the Diocese of San Jose

within each of us a negative legacy of centuries of a male system that does not recognize women's leadership, much less value it. As women and as priests, these tension-filled crossroads are encoded in our bodies, in our psyches.

This paper asks a question inspired by African American lesbian poet Audre Lorde: "Can the master's tools dismantle the master's house?"<sup>3</sup> In the case of Roman Catholic women priests Lorde's question addresses ecclesiology: using the titles deacons, priests, and bishops, we replicate the hierarchical model, but don't want to follow it. How do we redefine these models and their attendant theologies and still stay within the Roman Catholic Church?

To extend the question further, why do we think that the master's tools and the master's house are experienced as something outside of us? <sup>4</sup> Often when those who have been marginalized for so long begin to create their own structures, they duplicate the oppression and the brokenness that they have known. The seeds of the hierarchy have been planted deep within us as Catholic women. Clericalism is the only model we have grown up with. Can we ourselves become the "master's tools" and duplicate the patriarchy as we seek to transform it? How can women priests and bishops use these historically burdened titles, the "master's tools," to transform our church?

In this paper I will focus primarily on what effect Roman Catholic women priests have and will have on ecclesiology. Secondly, I will look at transnational networking. As our movement of women priests grows, how

---

<sup>3</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (New York, 1984) 123.

<sup>4</sup> Phone conversation with Carmen Lane, June 2006.

do we create support and governance across the Atlantic and Pacific, across borders, across cultures?

**Ecclesiology:**

As Roman Catholic women priests, we replicate the traditional model of priest in several ways:

- 1) we invoke apostolic succession as our bishops ordain deacons and priests
- 2) our ordination rite replicates the key moments of the traditional liturgy except that in the diaconate ordination we omit the promise of obedience to the bishop and also the promise of celibacy; we also add inclusive language
- 3) women are called deacons, priests or bishops
- 4) we respond to the needs of God's people with the sacraments
- 5) we wear traditional vestments but some of us are in the process of redesigning them

After hearing this list, if it weren't for the fact that there is a feminist agenda afoot in our movement, some might accuse us of being priests in drag. But we are much more subversive than that. And let me say right here, that the views I hold in this talk are not necessarily the views of all of our women priests. We all agree that the church needs to change. But there are differences among us as to the degree.

***In Persona Christi***

The first step in re-imagining the priesthood is enlarging the idea of *in persona Christi*. What is it? When the Church points to why women cannot be priests they point to two reasons:

- 1) a woman cannot be *in persona Christi*---that is, Jesus was a man and because priests represent Christ the church has no authority to change

this;<sup>5</sup>

- 2) Canon Law 1024 “only baptized males can receive the sacrament of ordination.” Canon Law is the organizational code of the Catholic Church.

When people come to the Masses where I preside, they do so against the warning issued by the bishop San Jose. It’s subversive to even show up for the Mass, let alone for a woman to wear vestments. At one of our nearby Catholic colleges, a student minister who has attended our Masses regularly has been silenced by the Provincial of that Order. So you see using the master’s tools to redesign the master’s house inflame the master, and eventually, we’re betting, will change the church. Here is the real crux of the matter: when it is stated that women cannot represent Christ, this reduces Christ to the physical male characteristics of the man Jesus, and also reduces representation to something physical. If that were the case, only Jewish males could represent Christ. But if women priests claim to be *in persona Christi*, then why not everybody? This is the radical inclusivity in the parable of the wedding banquet where the guests are invited from the streets. Everyone is invited. This must be a terrifying inclusivity to those who have been exclusive for centuries.

Certainly women as priests enlarge the notion of *in persona Christi*---but a change of gender is not enough. The real issue is the concept of a sacrificial priesthood.

---

<sup>5</sup> Flannery, “Presbyterorum Ordinis” in The basic sixteen documents of the Vatican Council II, Constitutions, decrees, declarations (New York, 1996), 317-364.

Marie Bouclin in her thoughtful new book *Seeking Wholeness: Women Dealing with Abusive Power in the Catholic Church* clarifies the source of clerical power in a sacrificial priesthood :

According to church teaching, sacrificial priesthood means that the priest offers, through the agency of bread and wine, the Body and Blood of Christ for the salvation of humanity. In doing so, the priest is not acting as an ordinary man, but supernaturally, in the person of Christ as a mediator between God and the faithful.”<sup>6</sup>

This teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, is a construct upon which is hung authority, power, even the notion of who God is. In this theology, the church elevates a sacrificial priesthood with the priest’s “power of offering the sacrifice of the Mass.” But a sleight of hand takes place---the priest himself becomes the sacred reality. At the last supper, Jesus asked the women and men gathered at table with him to break bread and lift the cup of wine, to eat and drink in thanksgiving. When I preside at a Mass, a Eucharist, it is just that—a thanksgiving, a meal that will strengthen us on our daily journey. It is the real presence of Christ called into our presence by all the participants around the table, the real presence of Christ both in the bread and wine and in the people. We are the body of Christ. I am not the only one who is *in persona Christi*—we all are.

Bouclin goes on to say that this hierarchical and sacrificial priesthood in Roman Catholic teaching “takes precedence over the baptismal priesthood of all the faithful.”<sup>7</sup> A feminist critique of Catholic priesthood must question the foundation of the “sacred power” of the priest. Sacred power belongs to

---

<sup>6</sup> Marie Evans Bouclin, *Seeking Wholeness: Women Dealing with Abuse of Power in the Catholic Church* (Collegeville, 2006) 29.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

all the baptized. Both male and female can represent, and must represent Christ. A priesthood based on radical inclusivity transforms the theology of the Mass.

If you take away the sacred power of a sacrificial priesthood and instead offer a model of priest as community member, and liturgical leader, then theology begins to shift as well as the structures that support it. Even the face of God begins to change. If the Mass is not a ritual sacrifice then we no longer invoke the image of a father who requires the death of his only son. Instead we offer thanksgiving to a God that suffers with us in the person of Christ, births with us, walks with us. And if the priest is a member of the community and liturgical leader, she or he is not necessarily celibate but is married or lives with a domestic partner, is heterosexual, or homosexual.

### **The Call, Preparation and Ministry of Women Priests**

In the first few years of the emergence of Roman Catholic Womenpriests (RCWP) the goal was to ordain women. The focus was not on their ministry, but on ordination. This has become for us in the USA a great source of discussion---who calls a woman forward to be ordained? Herself? A community? Both? What is ministry, when you are ministering from the margins? We've asked a Structure Committee made up of women priests and deacons to look at these questions.<sup>8</sup> A primary resource is South African Bishop Fritz Lobinger from his book *Like His Brothers and Sisters: Ordaining Community Leaders*. He offers the model of a Church of

---

<sup>8</sup> Our Structures were completed and ratified by all members of RCWP in February 2007. See <http://romancatholicwomenpriests.org>

Communion, a participatory model where leadership is not limited to the ordained. Lobinger's model suggests Ordained Community Leaders (OCL's) that are part of a team with an ordained minister who deals exclusively with liturgy.

While the inherent problem of "the holy priest," the sacred priest, still exists in this model, what is of interest from Bishop Lobinger's work are two ideas: first, that ordination is offered by the community to leaders of various ministries, such as visiting the sick, or education; second, that priests should be called forward by their communities. This is the model of the early church. If the gifts emerge from the community, then the community calls forth the gifts of individuals and supports the gifts of those called forth. The community becomes the source of discernment.

What we've found in the USA, for the most part, is that women are ordained and communities form around them, or are compelled to start worshipping communities. As a deacon, Jane Via and her husband Phil called forth those marginalized by the Roman Catholic Church in San Diego. The worshipping community decided to call themselves, Mary Magdalene, Apostle Catholic Community. For a year, Jane and an out gay priest presided at Masses. Then the community called Jane forth to priesthood. Just prior to Jane's ordination last month in Switzerland, the entire community went on retreat with her. Woman priest Marie David and her priest husband Jim run a retreat center, Evensong, in Massachusetts. In addition to offering retreats, a worshipping community has now formed.



However a woman expresses her ministry, the sacramental and theological training and spiritual preparation of candidates is a crucial area. There have been several proposed models. At present the training/preparation program of RCWP is an on-going discernment process as well as both a screening and a preparation for ordination. RCWP is not a university or a seminary program providing a theological degree. While every woman is considered on an individual basis in terms of requirements, for the most part, candidates complete a Masters of Divinity or equivalent theological degree as well as participating in a course of study and reflection online with a regional program director who works in consultation with one of our bishops, Dr. Patricia Fresen. Additionally, in the USA, many of our women are mentored by priests, some by married priests who are members of CORPUS. It is expected that our candidates for ordination meet regularly with a spiritual director. We also require a criminal background check and psychological testing to insure that the women ordained by us are psychologically and emotionally stable and mature. As the RCWP training/preparation program continues to expand in terms of numbers of participants, the program itself is undergoing revision and modification to provide objective standards locally as well as globally, at each level of the program.

### **The Role of the Bishop**

Among us as women priests and deacons, the issues of authority and obedience and the nature of hierarchy are the most challenging areas for dialog. As a movement for renewing priestly ministry, we have significant differences with the traditional role of priests and bishops in the Roman Catholic Church. How do we unlearn hierarchical decisionmaking. As women priests, we do not promise obedience to a bishop. Instead we live in

“prophetic obedience” to the Spirit, individually and as a community of women priests. One of our women bishops, Patricia Fresen explains

the word obedience comes from the Latin *ob-audire*, to listen attentively: to myself, to the signs of the times, and listening with others for the Spirit, who we believe is always moving and awakening (yes, calling) us to new levels of awareness. As Isaiah says so often: Listen to me, pay attention and your soul will live.”(e.g. Is. 55:3).<sup>9</sup>

Presently there are now four women bishops in Europe (Patricia Fresen, Gisela Forster, Christine Mayr-Lumetzburger and Ida Raming). As of this writing there are no women bishops in North America—yet. Again Bishop Fresen has said

“the reason for ordaining women as bishops was only so that they in turn can ordain priests which is the traditional method for ordination in the Roman Catholic Church. The ordination of women bishops is not to get locked into the hierarchical structures of the church.”<sup>10</sup>

The role of our women bishops at this point in our brief history is about a primary relationship with our ordinands, those they will ordain. But in North America, we are asking what is a bishop? Our structure committee composed of women priests and deacons from five regions of North America are exploring other models of episcopacy---including Episcopalian, Methodist, and Lutheran. Recently all of us in North America, were on a

---

<sup>9</sup>[www.romancatholicwomenpriests.org](http://www.romancatholicwomenpriests.org)

Patricia Fresen: “Prophetic Obedience.” Speech delivered at Women’s Ordination Conference 30<sup>th</sup> Year Celebration, Philadelphia, March 2005.

<sup>10</sup> [www.romancatholicwomenpriests.org](http://www.romancatholicwomenpriests.org) (Patricia Fresen: “Prophetic Obedience.” Speech delivered at Women’s Ordination Conference 30<sup>th</sup> Year Celebration, Philadelphia, March 2005.)

conference call with Gary Macy, a church historian at the University of San Diego. He offered several historical models of bishop. Thus we are considering various models to answer the question “what is a bishop?”

Some of our answers so far are the following. Perhaps a bishop’s role is to ordain but also to be a pastoral bridge connecting communities that have women priests and deacons. Perhaps she has no administrative role but is instead a pastor to all. Perhaps she is an ecumenical representative. Or, perhaps a bishop sits on the leadership team of a region, or a governance team for the North American organization of Roman Catholic Womenpriests, in each a co-equal with other members in voting. Whatever the roles, women bishops in North America will most probably be elected and have term limits of five years. What if a bishop abuses her position--- what if she becomes “the master’s tools?” As women we are all quite clear that dominating behavior is abuse and causes violence to one another. And so we are discerning how to put in place policies that can protect the people of God from a bishop who might abuse her power and influence.

After this summer’s ordinations in Pittsburgh, there will be 15 women priests and 5 womendeacons in RCWP North America.<sup>11</sup> In Europe, there are nearly the same number. Presently, in the preparation program there are over 100 women in Europe and North America. In the USA a<sup>11</sup>nd Canada the group is very large with over 80 women who are preparing to be ordained.

---

<sup>11</sup> As of January 2008, in RCWP North America, there are 26 priests, 11 deacons and 16 candidates.

To whom are deacons, priests and bishops accountable? We are accountable first, to the communities from whence we come; second, to the still forming community of Roman Catholic women priests. Could we repeat the clerical club of the traditional church? Yes we could if we are not conscious at every juncture that we are here to transform our church, as well as ourselves and to deconstruct the cleric-lay divide.

### **The Challenges of a Global Network**

At the moment, Roman Catholic Womenpriests is a movement in Europe and North America. Some women are also coming forward from India and Mexico. One of our women bishops has just returned from speaking to Catholics in South Korea. We will increasingly become a global network.

Up to now, it has been very difficult for us in the USA and Canada to manage face to face encounters with our European sister priests in order to build relationship and collaboration, key factors in women's leadership. Because of this there are inevitable misunderstandings due to language and cultural/national differences, such as Europe's fear of American schism, or American fear of European authoritarianism. Geographical separation and our own cultural history have perhaps assisted North American women priests and deacons in realizing that we may organize ourselves differently than RCWP Europe. Yet the need for relationship continues. Being part of larger networks has been helpful, such as Women's Ordination Worldwide (WOW) and the Women's Ordination Conference (WOC) as other forums in which we can encounter our sister priests. Yet organizations such as WOW have their own agendas. One of our strategies in the USA, as I mentioned

earlier, is that we have formed a non-profit organization able to receive donations and grants. With more economic clout, we hope to be able to offer assistance to our women priests for their ministries, for travel to gatherings of other women priests both nationally and internationally, and for financial assistance in further education.

There are so many unanswered questions at the moment. Within the next few years, there will be candidates and ordinands in Central and South America as well as Asia and Africa. What kinds of worshipping communities will blossom in each country, each culture? How will they organize themselves? Who will the women priests be who will serve God's people? How will we all build relationships and collaborations with one another? The Spirit awaits our questions with answers of Her own.

### **The Impact of Women's Ordination Globally**

As Roman Catholic Womenpriests, we are not just interested in gender equity. Along with other Catholic reform organizations, we are focused on the transformation of the Roman Catholic Church. We envision nothing less than inclusivity and accountability in our church. We seek the transformation of its theology and rituals, the lay-cleric divide and the hierarchical structures that keep that divide in place, as well as a renewing priestly ministry. Women priests are one step in the changes that need to take place. And the need for changes are legion--- as John the XXIII said--- "we need to open wide the windows."

But the issue of women's ordination must also be framed globally. Women seeking ordination to serve their communities encounter not only the sexism

of our church but also the barriers imposed by poverty, disease and the lack of education. Women's ordination and leadership in our church could significantly impact these situations. When the Vatican officially sanctions women's ordination with the enormous influence the Church has, it will shift the cultural negativity directed at women and thereby begin to impact the suffering of everyday women's lives worldwide. Make no mistake about it, the Roman Catholic Church, with one billion members globally, and a seat in the United Nations, has the potential for creating positive changes in women's lives.

Until that time, at the grassroots, women priests working with their communities are re-imagining the Church as the simple table of Jesus, where all are welcome. No one is left behind. No one is left out. All are welcome.

Standing at the crossroads of the past, present and future, we women priests feel the winds of the Spirit at our backs.

-----