

# ordination



Can Thai Theravada nuns  
and Roman Catholic  
women priests shatter the  
clerical glass ceiling?  
By Victoria Rue

During her ordination as a Theravada nun at  
Thailand's Songdhammakalyani monastery,  
Jiepcollects her hair in a lotus leaf .

COURTESY OF VICTORIA RUE

# as equals

Dressed in saffron robes, Venerable Dhammananda turned to me with scissors in her hands and asked, “And now your turn, Victoria?” Thailand’s first ordained Theravada bhikkhuni (nun) of the 21st century smiled. Her eyes welcomed me through round eyeglasses framed by a perfectly round shaven head. With this urging, I stepped to the side of the seated woman whose hair Dhammananda was cutting. For several days I’d seen Jiep about the monastery, or *wat*, dressed in the white clothes of a volunteer. She was young, maybe 22, with shoulder-length black hair. She’d been raised in this monastery since the age of 12, when her parents, having little money, brought her there to live and be educated. A few days before this ceremony, she had received her B.A. in journalism from central Thailand’s Nakhon Pathom Rajabhat University.

“The fact that she thought ordination is a worthwhile way of life, that made me cry, because life today for young people is usually so focused on consuming and acquiring,” reflected Dhammananda when we spoke earlier that week. And now here Jiep sat, on a stool under a banyan tree, watching her thick black hair accumulate with each snip of the scissors into a large lotus leaf that she held just below her chin. It was nine a.m. on a startlingly bright day. The morning sun was held at bay by a large umbrella placed over Jiep and the heads of the other female members of the assembled sangha: bhikkhunis, *mae ji* (Thai female renunciants), and lay women volunteers.

As I took the scissors, the significance of the invitation to participate in this traditional Buddhist ordination rite as a Roman Catholic woman priest was clear

to me. I had come to this monastery to explore with Dhammananda the possible parallels between the struggle for women’s ordination in the Roman Catholic Church and that of Theravada women in Thailand.

I took a strand of Jiep’s long black silky hair in my hands and cut. According to Dhammananda, with each cutting Jiep would repeat to herself: *Hair, nails, skin—the impermanence of it all*. One month earlier, an hour after my mother’s death, I had helped the nurse wash my mother’s body. Now I remembered so clearly the feel of my mother’s skin, her hands and arms, and yet my mother was not there. Skin that was, in some ways, no longer skin. Its use finished. Impermanent.

Dhammananda and I and now Jiep were all “outlaws”: an “illegal” ordained nun in the eyes of Thailand’s sangha and a woman priest *contra legem* in the eyes of the Vatican participating in the “illegal” ordination of a *samaneri*. (Theravada Buddhist ordination has two levels: first one becomes a samaneri, then a bhikkhuni or bhikkhu (monk); in the the Roman Catholic Church one is first ordained a deacon and then a priest.)

Earlier, upon my arrival at Songdhammakalyani monastery, I had given Dhammananda a gift, a clear crystal chalice engraved with “Women’s Ordination Conference.” WOC is a thirty-year-old organization in the United States that advocates for women’s ordination in the Roman Catholic Church. I have been on their board for three years. As I placed the chalice on a shelf in her residence, Dhammananda said, “We shall use it in the ordination ceremony.” This was the first indication that my visit had been blessed with an ordination. “It will hold the water of dedication.”

Victoria Rue, Ph.D., is a lecturer in Women’s Studies and Comparative Religious Studies at San José State University and a Roman Catholic woman priest. Her trip to Thailand was made possible by grants from The Sister Fund and San José State University. Rue’s website is: [victoriarue.com](http://victoriarue.com). The websites for these two movements are [thaibhikkhunis.org](http://thaibhikkhunis.org) and [romancatholicwomenpriests.org](http://romancatholicwomenpriests.org).

Nearly a hundred people sat on the third floor of the main ceremonial hall, witnessing Jiep receive her begging bowl and saffron robes. She was given the WOC chalice filled with the water of dedication, which she poured into a bowl. As Dhammananda explains it, “The water of dedication is a reenactment from the Buddha when he confronted the army of demons. He called on the Goddess of Earth to witness all the good things he had done in past lives, and every time he did, he poured water on the earth. So the Goddess of Earth personified herself and squeezed the water from her long hair. This caused a great flood and

In 1971 Dhammananda’s mother, Mrs. Voramai Kabilsingh, was ordained in Taiwan as the first Thai bhikkhuni not forced out of her saffron robes. But the Thai Sangha ignored her. They didn’t obstruct her, but neither did they offer her support. Though she established her own temple, Wat Songdhammakalyani, she did not form a sangha. In 2003, Voramai Kabilsingh’s daughter—then known as the Buddhist scholar and professor Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh—received ordination in Sri Lanka. She took the name Venerable Dhammananda and formed a sangha at the wat her

## Both the Thai Sangha and the Vatican rely on faulty scholarship.

defeated the demons. So we pour water every time we do an act of merit to dedicate it to the nation, our parents, our loved ones, and even our enemy.”

The new samaneri invited her teacher to preach. Dhammananda offered, “This moment of your ordination, this is a moment of rebirth, a new beginning of goodness...” I am still struck by her dedication. Certainly the ordination of women, whether in Thailand’s Theravada Buddhism or Roman Catholicism, is a moment of rebirth, and surely it is good for both traditions. For each has its own early history of ordained women—histories that these religious hierarchies have chosen to disempower.

In conversations with Dhammananda and in her books, I discovered numerous parallels between the histories that have shaped our two movements. In Theravada Buddhism, the first bhikkhuni was the Buddha’s own stepmother and aunt. There are at least seventy-three names of fully ordained women recorded in the *Therīgāthā* (“Psalms of the Elder Sisters”) and, as Dhammananda has noted in her scholarly work, “thirteen of them were singled out and praised by the Buddha. The female order not only shared the same responsibilities as monks but also helped to propagate Buddhism. In the third century BCE, King Ashoka’s daughter Sanghamitta went to Sri Lanka to give ordination to Sri Lankan women.” This lineage later moved to China and Korea, but never to Thailand. It was not until 1928 that two Thai women were ordained, only to be imprisoned and forced out of the saffron robes. The Thai Supreme Patriarch declared that the lineage of bhikkhunis in Theravada Buddhism had died out many centuries earlier. Thai monks were now forbidden to ordain women.

mother had established. However, the Thai Sangha did not recognize her ordination, invoking the 1928 decision. And the response of many Thai monks was simply: There are no nuns in Thai Theravada Buddhism, and thus the Theravada bhikkhuni tradition cannot be revived.

There is a similar history in Christianity of women’s initial importance in religious tradition and subsequent exclusion from it. Jesus, in fact, ordained neither men nor women. He was a reformer of Judaism. The Christian ritual of ordination developed in the second century. However, there are numerous women mentioned by name in the letters of Paul, among them Junia, who is referred to as an apostle (Romans 16:7). In recent years scholars such as Gary Macy have found evidence of women deacons, priests, and bishops as late as the 12th century. Yet over the same period of time, women were gradually excluded from church leadership. It was Gratian of Bologna in the 12th century who consolidated church power and ecclesial organization with canon law. With one stroke of his misogynist pen he wrote canon law 1024, which states that “only a baptized male can receive the sacrament of holy orders.” Following his lead, the majority of canonists and theologians not only denied that women could be ordained but also believed that women had never been ordained. This is the present-day position of the Vatican and mirrors the stance of the Thai Sangha.

In 2002, the year before Dhammananda’s historic ordination, seven women were ordained as Catholic priests on a boat on the river Danube in Europe. The worldwide reaction to the ordinations of both Dhammananda and the “Danube Seven,” as they came to be called, was tremendous, both in favor and



Victoria Rue, a Roman Catholic woman priest, presents an engraved crystal chalice to Dhammananda, Thailand's first ordained Theravada nun.

opposed. The seven women priests were excommunicated within six months. Despite this, male bishops in 2003 and 2005 ordained three women as bishops in secret ceremonies. To date, these women bishops have ordained 75 women priests and deacons in Europe and North America. In May 2008, the Vatican excommunicated not only the ordained women but also all those known to have ordained them.

Does that stop us? Hardly. Before he became pope, Cardinal Ratzinger wrote: "Over the Pope as the expression of the binding claim of ecclesiastical authority, there still stands one's own conscience, which must be obeyed before all else, if necessary even against the requirement of ecclesiastical authority." We are following our consciences as we continue our ministries. I was among the first four women ordained in North America in 2005. Today, I preside at Masses in two California congregations: one at the Sophia Catholic Community, a house church in Santa Cruz; the other at Sophia in Trinity, in San Francisco. I am also a hospice chaplain and a lecturer at San José State University. Other women priests across the country have street ministries, small faith communities, and hospital chaplaincies. We have received overwhelming support from Catholics. But despite the historical evidence and the groundswell of support, the Vatican continues to repeat that Jesus chose only male apostles and that the institution is thus powerless to enact change.

I looked up into the face of Thailand's full July moon. The Medicine Buddha's white-walled temple, nestled in the rear of the Wat Songdhammakalyani property, was bathed in blue light. The male and female volunteers dressed in white, the four mae ji also

in white, the two samaneris and Dhammananda in saffron—in all, some thirty people—were also bathed in the moonlight as we sat outside on the white temple steps, gratefully receiving a cool breeze. The evening's chanting echoed across the lawn and adjacent fishpond. Then silent meditation, orchestrated by frogs.

The voice of Dhammananda called us back. Perhaps moved by the perfect sphere of the full moon, she asked us to move from our rows facing the Medicine Buddha into a circle. Once settled, she asked us in Thai and then in English what we would like to share about the day's events. Person by person came a soft-spoken and honest sharing, like a family reviewing the day. This invitation to make a space for everyone's voice is one example of the difference that women's leadership can make. Because religious authority has privileged the male voice, many women are deeply aware that wisdom and empowerment occur when all are heard.

Within the two faith communities I serve, and I would venture to say among most congregations led by women priests in our movement, we strive for "a discipleship of equals." Although the feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza intends this phrase to mean an end to all ordination per se, we interpret it as a democratization of both liturgical function and authority without losing the role of priest. For example, the Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass is traditionally spoken only by a priest. But in a Mass presided at by a woman priest, this same prayer is often broken into many voices—and the consecration ("on the night before Jesus died he took bread...") is prayed by all members of the community. Women's leadership also affects how congregations are organized: in San Diego at Mary Magdalene Apostle *(continued on page 116)*



(continued from page 73) Catholic Community, the parish council—composed of nonordained people—makes all the decisions for the community, including the liturgy.

As we sat in Dhammananda's office one morning after breakfast and dishwashing, she offered an everyday example of shared authority: "I am very conscious of getting people to think. For example, the other day the toilet overflowed in one of the buildings here. I asked some of our volunteers, 'How shall we fix this? You come back and tell me, and we will do it.' You see, our culture has always followed the monk."

But at that very moment in our conversation, a volunteer at the wat came in, knelt before Dhammananda and asked if she needed anything. Some Catholics believe a priest follows a higher calling and should be treated differently—that the priest is holier, closer to God. Some Catholics bow and kiss the rings of their bishops. Yet these gestures of respect also reflect power. How should women view them?

As a priest, I am often asked, sometimes in jest, "Should we address you as Mother instead of Father?" I answer, please call me Victoria. Certainly this is an attempt to level the playing field. Yet the lay-cleric divide is difficult to dislodge: patriarchal religious tra-

ditions have imposed hierarchical differences that clerics too often uphold, whether by action or acquiescence. Thai Theravada nuns and Roman Catholic women priests who face the challenge of legitimacy from their religious hierarchies live a complicated tension between people's expectations of them and their own desire to empower everyone.

At the two daily meals taken by Dhammananda and the samaneris, I noticed that they sat separately from the rest of the community and took food first. Later she explained, "If you don't do it, they don't consider you ordained! We are expected to do whatever male monks do. But we try other ways. For example, people come to a monk for a blessing. But I tell people, 'The blessing comes from what you have done, not from me.' And in the same way, enlightenment is reached not because you are ordained, but by what you do." She thought for a moment and then went on. "As for the table and the food, yes, this is power, you are right. But the question is, how are you going to use power? What I do is take very little food. Also, I give some of my share to the last person who is served." That very day, at lunch, I was the last person to take food. As I sat down to eat, one of the volunteers brought me half


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an avocado. “Dhammananda wants to share this with you, Victoria.” It made the avocado even more delicious—a symbol, perhaps, of sharing power.


There are certainly differences between the movements for women’s ordination in Thai Theravada Buddhism and Roman Catholicism. Bhikkhunis are monastics and are celibate. In contrast, women priests can be married, partnered or single, homosexual or heterosexual, celibate or not. The educational preparation of candidates, while often revealing shared values, follows distinct guidelines in each tradition. Although Chatsumarn Kabilsingh had a Ph.D. when she received the first level of ordination as a samaneri and two years later that of bhikkhuni, for other women such a high level of education is not necessary. What is important is that a woman wishing to become a bhikkhuni must live two years in a sangha and spend two years after full ordination in a sangha with her teacher. In the new Catholic tradition of women’s ordination, candidates must have a Master of Divinity or its equivalent, complete ten units of our formation program, pass a criminal background check, and complete a psychological evaluation.

Each of these movements for women’s ordination is gaining ground with a common momentum, despite marginalization by the official body of their respective religions. Today in Chiang Mai (the largest city in northern Thailand), there are 24 bhikkhunis and samaneris headed by Venerable Nandayani, who graduated from Chiang Mai University with a degree in science. Perhaps because they are farther away from Bangkok and the seat of government, these bhikkhunis are accepted by senior monks in the north. Some of these monks are mentors for samaneris. On April 6, 2009, 36 women—34 Thai, one Dutch, and one Austrian—underwent temporary ordination at Wat Songdhammakalyani. In the Roman Catholic woman priest movement, more women are being ordained each year.

Both movements for ordaining women live in a dynamic tension. We are living in the “not yet” right now. We are embraced and supported by people at the grassroots of our religions. We are shunned by hierarchies that are simply out of touch. Yet we live each day as bhikkhunis and priests, walking with people on their spiritual journeys, ministering to all. As Dhammananda says, “My shaved head is my calling card. It says, ‘What can I do for you?’” ▼



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