

A Brief Overview of Womenpriests in the History of the Roman Catholic Church

Bridget Mary Meehan, Olivia Doko, and Victoria Rue

Roman Catholic Womenpriests are a new and ancient model of priesthood, within the Roman Catholic Church.

In our mission statement we clearly uphold the following: *The goal of the group "RC Womenpriests" (Roman Catholic Womenpriests) is to bring about the full equality of women in the Roman Catholic Church. At the same time we are striving for a new model of Priestly Ministry. The movement "RC Womenpriests" does not perceive itself as a counter-current movement against the Roman Catholic Church. It wants neither a schism nor a break from the Roman Catholic Church, but rather wants to work positively within the Church.*

Womenpriests are leading the Catholic Church into a new era in which the identity of priest reflects the experiences of women, as representatives of the sacred. Womenpriests remind us that women are equal symbols of the holy. Patriarchy's dark lie that women are more responsible for the fall of humankind has been smashed as women in priestly ministry defy an unjust law that keeps women subordinate in the Catholic Church. Reclaiming our ancient spiritual heritage, womenpriests are shaping a more inclusive, Christ-centered church of equals in the twenty-first century.

The Vatican is a patriarchal/hierarchical structure. The structure itself must be renewed through accountability and by creating a discipleship of equals. The present gap between clergy and laity needs to be eliminated. As ordained women, we must find a way to call forth the gifts of each member of the community. We All are church, not just some. We are offering a vision where All are welcome. Womenpriests and deacons must be the rainbow---we reflect the people we serve: married, celibate, domestic partners, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual and transgendered.

Roman Catholic Womenpriests walk in solidarity with our women apostles, prophets, teachers, virgins, widows, deacons, priests, abbesses, and bishops in the early church. We affirm the saintly women and men in our Catholic tradition whose words and lives give testimony to the vision of Jesus. They are our companions on the journey to a transformed Roman Catholic Church in which a discipleship of equals is a reality in all areas of the church's life.

In 1976, the Pontifical Biblical Commission concluded that there is no biblical reason to prohibit women's ordination. Women and men are created in God's image and both may represent Christ as priests. In the image of God, God created humankind, male and female God created them. (Genesis 1:26-27) Jesus did not ordain anyone. Deacons, presbyters (elders) and bishops are not mentioned in the Gospels. Jesus had male and female disciples, who became apostles by being sent away (from Greek *apo*, *away* and *stello*, *send*) by being told to "Go and tell." Jesus chose the Samaritan woman to announce the good news to her entire village. The Samaritans accepted Jesus as Messiah because of her testimony.

Within our faith tradition and Sacred Scripture we discover evidence of a history rich in the call and participation of women in all dimensions of ministry:

Mary of Magdala, the first witness of the resurrection, was commissioned by Jesus to be the apostle to the apostles. (John 20:1-18)

- **Pope Hippolytus, who lived from 170 to 236 AD, addressed the role of women in early Christianity in which Jesus made a resurrection appearance to certain women such as Mary Magdalene, and "sends them out on the apostolic mission as the first gospel messengers."** (Brock, pp. 43-49): "Lest the female apostles doubt the angels, Christ himself came to them so that the women would be apostles of Christ and by their obedience rectify the sin of the ancient Eve . . . Christ showed himself to the (male) apostles and said to them: . . .'It is I who appeared to the women and I who wanted to send them to you as apostles.' "
- Gregory of Antioch (d. 593) (Brock, 15), in *Oratio in Mulieres Unguentiferas XI*, PG 88, 1863-64: "Portrays Jesus as appearing to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary at the tomb and saying to them: 'Be the first teachers to the teachers. So that Peter who denied me learns that I can also choose women as apostles.' "
- **Phoebe, the deacon, was praised by St. Paul for her leadership of the church of Cenchreae. (Romans 16:1-2)**
- Mary, the mother of John Mark, led a congregation. (Acts 12:12)
- **In Romans 16:7 St. Paul identifies Junia as a senior in the faith to himself and labels Junia and her husband, Andronicus, as "outstanding apostles". It is the only time that Paul refers to anyone other than The Twelve or himself as apostles. (St John Chrysostom, 4th century bishop, recognized Junia as a member of the apostolic circle. (The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1, 11:555 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956)**
- The Louvre possesses the mummy tag of an Egyptian woman, Artemidora, a Christian living between approximately 250 and 350 AD. The tag describes her as a "presbyter," that is, priest. For photo, see Irvin, *Calendars*.
- **A burial site for Epikto, on a Greek island, Thera, from the third or fourth century calls her a "presbytis" which means "priest or presbyter". (Eisen, pp. 123-4)**
- In the Catacombs of Priscilla, Rome, the fresco "Fractio Panis" shows a group of women "conducting a Eucharistic banquet". Catholic theologian, Dorothy Irvin believes that the red background and location of this fresco indicates a date close to 100 A. D. "The slope of the shoulders, feminine postures and jaw lines,

earlobes, breasts and upswept hair-do's with forehead curls attest to the femininity of all those seated around the table. (Irvin, *Calendars*)

- **A fifth century inscription carved on the sarcophagus of Leta Presbitera describes "Leta Presbitera" and states: "Of blessed memory Leta the Presbyter lived 40 years, 8 months, 9 days whose husband prepared her burial she departed in peace the day before the Ides of May." Ides 15th -1 = May 14th. (Irvin, *Calendars*)**
- A Sicilian 4th or 5th century inscription calls Kale the "presbytis" or elder. (Irvin, *Calendars*)
- **A fourth century floor mosaic covering the tomb of Guilia Runa is located in the cathedral at Annaba acknowledges: "Guilia Runa, woman priest". This cathedral was made famous by St. Augustine of Hippo. (Irvin, *Calendars*)**
- In the catacomb of St. Januarius in Naples, Bitulia, a woman priest, is depicted attired in a red chasuble and celebrating the Eucharist. She has two cups on a white cloth in front of her, one is wine one is water to mix with the wine as is still done today. Above her are two open books with markers and on each of the four pages the name of an evangelist is written. (Irvin, *Calendars*)
- **On the ceiling in the Chapel of the Veiling in the Catacomb of St. Priscilla, is a fresco, dated about 350 A.D. that depicts a woman deacon in the center vested in a dalmatic, her arms raised in the orans position for public worship. On the left side of the scene is a woman being ordained a priest by a bishop seated in a chair. She is vested in an alb, chasuble, and amice, and holding a gospel scroll. The woman on the right end of this fresco is wearing the same robe as the bishop on the left and is sitting in the same type of chair. She is turned toward the figures in the center and left, watching the woman deacon and priest. "These attributes", comments Dorothy Irvin, "indicate that she is thought of as a bishop, while the baby she is holding identifies her as Mary...Women's ordination, however, was based on succession from the apostles, including women such as Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary from Magdala, Phoebe, Petronella, and others about whose status among the founders of the church there could be no doubt." (Irvin, *Calendars*)**
- Bishop Theodora, mother of Pope Paschal 1, is depicted in a group portrait standing next to St. Praxedis and the Blessed Virgin Mary in a mosaic in a side chapel of the church of St. Praxedis in Rome. (Morris, 4-6, Eisen 200-205). Theodora, about 820 A. D. and St. Praxedis who lived seven hundred years earlier are depicted as standing together, wearing their episcopal crosses. They witness to a conscious connection between women church office holders and Mary, Mother of Jesus. (Irvin, *Calendars*)

- **“While the preponderance of evidence for female deacons is in the East,” scholars Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek conclude in their scholarly book on women in Holy Orders that, “ the evidence for women presbyters is greater in the west.” (*Ordained Women in Early Church*, p. 3.)**
- Giorgio Otranto, director of the Institute of Classical and Christian Studies, University of Bari, Italy believes evidence of women priests is found in an epistle of Pope Gelasius I (late 5th c). In 494 AD Pope Gelasius wrote a letter to the bishops of three regions of southern Italy complaining about the practice of women presiding at the liturgy: "Nevertheless we have heard to our annoyance that divine affairs have come to such a low state that women are encouraged to officiate at the sacred altars, and to take part in all matters imputed to the offices of the male sex, to which they do not belong."
In summary Otranto concludes, “we may infer from an analysis of Gelasius's epistle that at the end of the fifth century, some women, having been ordained by bishops, were exercising a true and proper ministerial priesthood in a vast area of southern Italy, as well as perhaps in other unnamed regions of Italy.”
(Otranto, *Notes on the Female Priesthood in Antiquity*, Section 2, http://www.womenpriests.org/traditio/otran_1.asp)
- **The *Irish Life of Brigit* describes the episcopal ordination of St. Brigit of Kildare by Bishop Mel of Ardagh in fifth century Ireland. Brigit was consecrated by Mel, who, “being intoxicated with the grace of God there, did not know what he was reciting from his book, for he consecrated Brigit with the orders of a bishop.” (Davies , p.33.)**
- The evidence in the Celtic Church indicates that women and men were equals in preaching the Gospel, presiding at Mass and at the other sacraments. In the sixth century, three Roman bishops at Tours wrote a letter to two Breton priests Lovocat and Cathern, expressing their outrage that women were allowed to preside at Eucharist. “You celebrate the divine sacrifice of the Mass with the assistance of women to whom you give the name *conhospitae** ...While you distribute the eucharist, they take the chalice and administer the blood of Christ to the people... Renounce these abuses...! *(mixed houses or double monasteries where men and women lived together and raised their children in the service of Christ) (Ellis, pp.142-144)
- In double monasteries, men and women worked as equals. However, the overall authority within a double monastery often resided with an abbess. St. Brigit selected Conleth to help her administer Kildare, and they governed “their church by a mutual, happy alliance.” Meehan, p.14.)
- **The tradition of a Christian seeking a spiritual guide, mentor, soul friend or *anam cara* (Gaelic) was a prevalent Celtic custom. Women as well as men served as spiritual friends. This custom eventually influenced the entire**

Church and led to the institutionalizing of private confession. These are stories of spiritual seekers coming to Saint Ita and Saint Samthann to reveal their sins and to receive forgiveness and guidance. (Meehan, p. 15)

- In the tenth century, Bishop Atto of Vercelli wrote that because of the needs of the church, devout women were ordained to lead worship and to preside over the church. Church historian Gary Macy writes, "For over 1200 years the question of the validity of women's ordination remained at least an open question. Some popes, bishops and scholars accepted such ordinations as equal to those of men, others did not. (Gary Macy, Theological Studies, September, 2000. p. 3.)
- St. Therese of Lisieux, a Doctor of the Church, wanted to be a priest. She cut up her mother's wedding dress after her father's death to make a chasuble. (See *Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux*, The Story of a Soul.)
- **St. Therese of Lisieux said, in 1897: "God is going to take me at an age when I would not have had the time to become a priest . . . If I could have been a priest, I would have been ordained at these June ordinations. So what did God do? So that I would not be disappointed, he let me be sick: in that way I could not have been there, and I would die before I could exercise my ministry."**

Therese spoke those words to her sister, Celine Martin. Celine also testified (at the 1910 beatification diocesan tribunal) that "the sacrifice of not being able to be a priest was something Therese always felt deeply . . . (H)er regret . . . was caused by a real love of God, and inspired high hopes in her. The thought that St. Barbara had brought communion to St. Stanislaus Kostka thrilled her."

Therese said: "Why must I be a nun, and not an angel or a priest? Oh! What wonders shall we see in heaven! I have a feeling that those who desired to be priests on earth will be able to share in their honour of the priesthood in heaven."

In her Story of a Soul (Day, ed., p. 187) Therese stated (in a prayer to Jesus): "If I were a priest, how lovingly I would carry you in my hands when you came down from heaven at my call; how lovingly I would bestow you upon people's souls. I want to enlighten people's minds as the prophets and doctors did. I feel the call of an Apostle. I would love to travel all over the world, making your name known and planting your cross on a heathen soil."

- **Joan of Arc : From Heretic to Saint : Our Role Model of Holy Disobedience**
When St. Joan of Arc was asked whether she was subject to church authorities, she replied "yes, but our Lord must be served first." (See Marina Warner, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism* cited in Ellsberg, pp.136)

There were holy women in religious orders who were at some point excommunicated (Bd. Mary McKillop, Bd. Anne Marie Javouhey and Bd. Theodore Guerin). Read their stories in Robert Ellsberg, *Blessed Among All Women*). Some women faced opposition and even persecution in their struggle to live their vocations, "—especially if this involved any kind of innovation"— from

male authorities who “were only too eager to inform them that their visions or desires contradicted the will of God.” **Some, like the Beguines, a new model of religious life in Medieval times were suppressed and effectively written out of history. Mary Ward, founder of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, was imprisoned and condemned as a “heretic, schismatic and rebel of the Holy Church.” (Ellsberg, p.299.) Others like Angela Merici prevailed. But more than a few could share the motto applied to St. Angela Merici, founder of the Ursuline order: "A Woman Faced with Two Alternatives. She Saw and Chose the Third." (Ellsberg, pp. 16-17)**

Prophetic women, like Catherine of Siena and Birgitta of Sweden confronted the corruption and abuses of the institutional church. Acting on her “authority as God’s messenger” Birgitta insisted that the pope leave the comforts of Avignon and return to his proper seat in Rome.” One time, she denounced the pope as ‘a murderer of souls, worse than Lucifer, more unjust than Pilate, and more merciless than Judas.’ The pope did not respond to her calls for reform of the church, but he did approve the Rule of her new religious order, The Brigettines, or Order of the Most Holy Savior. (Ellsberg, p. 135.)

Like Joan of Arc, and these courageous women who endured condemnation and excommunication during their lifetimes by the church for their holy disobedience, Roman Catholic women priests will one day be affirmed as faithful daughters of the church who created new models of discipleship in 21st century. Let's hold up the holy women in the history of our church who were excommunicated and continued to shine like the stars in heaven as our role models. Like them, may we be witnesses to true discipleship.

There is reason for hope that more contemporary church officials will follow the teaching of Cardinal Walter Kasper, who said, "Some situations oblige one to obey God and ones own conscience, rather than the leaders of the church. Indeed, one may even be obliged to accept excommunication, rather than act against one's conscience." (CORPUS REPORTS Nov./Dec. 2005)

“We must admit that there cannot be a participatory church with gender justice as long as the church retains the assumption that female humanity is ontologically different and secondary to male humanity.” (Brother Verghese Theckanath, in a speech to a National Conference of Religious Superiors in India, source: Union of Catholic Asian News, Jan. 30, 2006)

We invite our Roman Catholic Church leaders to join us in an open, respectful dialogue so that together we may serve the church faithfully and lovingly.

To this end we state in our constitution Article I 1. (to be found on our website: www.romancatholicwomenpriests.org) ***1.The goal of the group: "RC Womenpriests" is to bring about the full equality of women in the Roman Catholic Church. At the same time we are striving for a new model of Priestly Ministry. When these goals are reached***

and Can. 1024 CIC has been changed, the group "RC Womenpriests" will be dissolved.

In her address: "Prophetic Obedience: The Experience and Vision of Roman Catholic Womenpriests to the Southeast Pennsylvania Women's Ordination Conference in March, 2005, **Bishop Patricia Fresen, D.Th** said: **"Now we in the Church are on another 'long walk to freedom', this time freedom from sexism, from unjust discrimination against women in the church, freedom from oppression by the privileged clerical caste in the church. Once again, we need to stand together in protest, to break the unjust laws because we cannot wait forever, and we need, at least at the beginning, to move into the structures that exist and change them"**

Womenpriests remind us that women are equal symbols of the holy and therefore should preside at the celebration of the sacraments. Like Rosa Parks, whose refusal to sit in the back of the bus ignited the civil rights movement, Roman Catholic womenpriests are leading the Catholic church into a new age of equality for women in the church. Like Jesus, inclusivity will be our hallmark as we welcome all to God's table of plenty at the Banquet of love. Inspired by our ancient sisters who have gone before us as apostles, deacons, priests, bishops and leaders in the church, we embrace our call to live Christ's vision of Gospel equality in the 21st century.

Suggested Bibliography:

Brock Ann Graham, Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle The Struggle for Authority, 2003 (quotes Hippolytus (DeCantico 24-26, CSCO 264) pp. 43-49)

Davies, Oliver (ed), Celtic Spirituality, New York: Paulist, 1999.

Day, G.M. (ed), Story of a Soul, (London: Burns & Oates, 1951), p. 187.

Eisen, Ute, Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies. Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2000. Transl. From German original

Ellis, Peter. Celtic Women, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996

Ellsberg, Robert. Blessed Among All Women; New York, Crossroad, 2005

Irvin, Dorothy, Roman Catholic theologian and archaeologist; Dorothy is the creator of a series of annual calendars depicting the archaeology of women's traditional ministries in the Church. For more information about Dorothy's work and to purchase her beautiful calendars please contact Dorothy at irvincalendar@hotmail.com

Macy, Gary. *Theological Studies*, (September. 2000) cited in *Church Watch*, (January-February 2001) p. 3.

Madigan, Kevin and Osiek, Carolyn. Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History, John Hopkins University Press, 2005.

Meehan, Bridget Mary. Praying with Celtic Holy Women, Liguori Missouri, Liguori Publications, 2003.

Morris, Joan; The Lady Was A Bishop: The Hidden History of Women with Clerical Ordination and the Jurisdiction of Bishops; New York: The Macmillan Company; London: Collier-Macmillan Limited, 1973

Otranto, Giorgi, *Notes on the Female Priesthood in Antiquity*, Section 1, http://www.womenpriests.org/traditio/otran_1.asp

Raming, Ida; The Priestly Office of Women: God's Gift to a Renewed Church, In the series: A History of Women in Ordination, edited by Bernard Cooke and Gary Macy, The Scarecrow Press, Lanham, MD, Toronto, Oxford, 2004 - ISBN 0-8108-0957-5

Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth; Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation; Crossroad, 1993

Warner, Marina. Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981 cited in Robert Ellsberg, Blessed Among All Women, New York, Crossroad, 2005, pp.136)

* Special thanks to Olivia Doko from the Roman Catholic Womenpriests' community for her assistance in editing this educational resource.