#1 Can Women Be Priests? Some Say Yes

First Stop: USA

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First of all, thank you to everyone who has subscribed to Senza mulini in recent weeks. And a special thanks to those who, inspired by issue zero, chose a paid subscription - especially considering that this is a free newsletter, supported by its readers. For the launch, I also activated a special promotion of 30% discount.

Katya Parente interviewed me for La Tenda di Gionata about Senza mulini. I shared some previews of upcoming issues.

That said, let's get started!

I told my small group, here where I live, that I had received this invitation. They responded: "We want you to go and be our priest."

This month's guest is Bridget Mary Meehan. Born in Ireland, she lives in Florida, has been a priest since 2006, a bishop since 2009 and is part of the Roman Catholic Women Priests (RCWP) association.

A linguistic note: in Italian, "prete" (priest) is an ambigender noun, like "custode" (caretaker) or "preside" (principal). It remains unchanged regardless of gender, with the article indicating whether it refers to a man or a woman: "la prete" (female priest) or "il prete" (male priest). The Italian linguistic authority, the Accademia della Crusca, confirms this usage.

Here's the video interview

The first stop of Senza mulini is the USA, to observe from there a growing movement that is spreading worldwide: that of Catholic women becoming priests.

In what sense? Is it really possible? Isn't excommunication a consequence? And who gives them the authority to be presbyters?

Let's take it step by step. Let's go back to Bridget Mary Meehan's story, as she answers my questions from Sarasota, Florida.

Bridget Mary Meehan: A Life Directed Toward Priesthood

As she recounts in the interview, Bridget Mary Meehan, after an experience as a nun with the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, decided to dedicate herself more to parish life and joined the Sisters for Christian Community (SFCC), an ecumenical community of nuns founded in 1970 in direct response to the Second Vatican Council.

Take note of this connection with Vatican II. It will return in the next issue!

This valuable historical document portrays Meehan in the habit of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Next to her are her parents, Bridie and Jack Meehan (1969).

Meehan then became—using her own words—a "freelance nun," with no rules except the Gospel. After earning a Master's degree in Religious Education, she finally reached a small Catholic parish where she stayed for 15 years. There, she worked closely with a military chaplain who asked her to lead the communion service, specifically instructing her not to give the impression of celebrating Mass. Why?

According to Catholic doctrine, the Mass must be presided over by a priest and includes the Eucharistic consecration of bread and wine. Meehan, as a woman and a nun, could not even give the impression of being a priest.

The communion service, however, is a function without consecration, where readings are read and listened to, and previously consecrated Eucharist is distributed. According to Catholic doctrine, it can be led by someone who is not a priest, like Meehan.

However, those attending her services were increasingly enthusiastic, to the point that they considered these moments equivalent to Mass. It didn't matter that there was no priest or that the Eucharist was not consecrated at that moment. What mattered to those listening to Meehan was the spiritual contribution she provided, making her a true leader for the community.

These people were ready for a female priest, and I was called to be one.

The chaplain then encouraged her to pursue a doctorate. Meehan enrolled at the Episcopal seminary in Alexandria, Virginia, becoming the first Catholic woman in that faculty to obtain a PhD in Ministry—the title required in some Protestant communities for ordination.

At this point, another call came: that of the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests. In 2005, Meehan was invited to witness the ordination of other women priests on the St. Lawrence River. In 2006, she herself was ordained in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—the first such case in the United States. When her Catholic community learned of her ordination, they not only encouraged her to go and asked her to be their presbyter, but also covered her travel expenses.

A photo of the ordination on the Majestic boat from Meehan's blog. The RCWP archives also contain a video.

In this close-up, Meehan is standing next to Bishop Patricia Fresen.

Upon returning to Florida, she celebrated her first Mass in her home, around her living room table. This report shows some moments of the celebration. Her community, enthusiastic about these Masses, suggested inviting others who did not yet know Meehan as a priest. They decided to place an ad in the local newspaper and were met with opposition from the bishop, who considered Meehan a false minister and her Masses mere performances.

A media case ensued, and the number of people choosing to participate in Meehan's Masses grew so much that her living room was no longer sufficient. She had to rent a nearby church, St. Andrew United Church of Christ in Sarasota.

From this moment, she was recognized as the leader of the Mary Mother of Jesus Inclusive Catholic Community in Sarasota, Florida, specifically dedicated to Mary as the first preacher of the Gospel. Her ministerial journey continued, and in 2009 in Santa Barbara, California, she became a bishop.

She enthusiastically recounts her life journey: she finally saw the possibility of being a minister for those on the margins, for those who feel and are excluded, cast out, but who still have faith and a desire to live their spirituality in a community. This guided her steps during family rosaries in Ireland, in Catholic school, in the various congregations of nuns she experienced, alongside the military chaplain, and on that boat in 2006 as she was ordained.

If you want to delve deeper into gender issues in the Church, I was featured in the newsletter Ti spiego il dato *by Donata Columbro. I wrote about the role of women in the Church, the gender gap, unpaid labor, and the reaction: the global strike organized for the upcoming Lent by the Women's Ordination Conference. You can read it here.*

So, Can Women Be Priests?

I started with Bridget Mary Meehan's story and experience because reality always surpasses imagination, let alone rules. Even though recent synodal statements claim that the Church is not ready, RCWP's experience shows that more and more faithful desire a female priest in their community, and more and more women are expressing their vocation.

Of course, the issue is far more complex than it may seem. At least two factors must be considered: the constraints imposed by the Vatican and the freedom of conscience. How do these combine? You'll have to wait two weeks to find out!

To Be Continued

For today, we stop here. In the next issue:

- What do Vatican documents say about female ordination?
- Why does RCWP ordain women, and with what authority?
- The first female ordination in Italy.

Senza mulini is also on Instagram. Come show your support there too!