



# CATHOLIC WOMEN AND HOLY ORDERS: THE TIME IS NOW



Photo/Dorothy Irvin. Used with permission.

Left to right: Episcopa (Bishop) Theodora, St. Praxedis, Virgin Mary, and St. Pudentiana. Titular basilica of St. Praxedis, Rome, A.D. 820.

## COUNCIL OF THE BAPTIZED

SERVING CATHOLICS IN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF ST. PAUL/MINNEAPOLIS

# **The Council of the Baptized**

This paper is published by the Council of the Baptized which is a 21 member panel of Catholics, chartered in January 2012, to be a collegial voice for a growing community of Catholics in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis in honoring their baptismal responsibility for their local church.

Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (CCCR), initiator of the Council charter, having listened to Catholics since its incorporation in 2009, recognized a need for a representative body to hear the people's concerns of conscience. The Council's role is to deliberate on concerns brought to them and to speak to those concerns, fully grounded in the tradition of the Church and in its official teaching in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

The Council of the Baptized is not an officially designated or recognized council of the Archdiocese.

For further history, to read the charter and responsibilities of the Council of the Baptized and to find the current membership, go to [www.cccr-cob.org](http://www.cccr-cob.org). To submit a proposal, see inside back cover.

## **The Proposal for Catholic Women and Holy Orders:**

A group of local Catholics who have long advocated for ordaining women and are pained at the Church's resistance have brought their concern of conscience to the Council of the Baptized. It is not only right to ordain women along with our brothers but it is consistent with the teachings of scripture and the call of the Holy Spirit. We now live in a new world. People from all generations, especially millennials, call for inclusivity and equality in all aspects of life, including within our Church. We join with the eleven priests in Cologne, Germany who recently stated in their Open Letter, "It makes no sense continuously to ask the Holy Spirit for vocations while at the same time to exclude women from priestly ministry." (*National Catholic Reporter*, Jan 13, 2017.)

It is with love and respect for the institution of the Roman Catholic Church that the following have prepared this position paper: Mary Beth Stein, Robert Wedl, Marilyn Wegscheider, Helen Marie Plourde SSND, Bonnie Strand, and Mary Jo Czaplewski. February 2017.



## Proposals to the Council

To honor our baptismal responsibility in the local church, we must act on our concerns of conscience. We can address our concerns through the Council of the Baptized either with programs we implement ourselves or with programs we recommend to the Archdiocese to implement. We can also research and draft position statements or papers that ground the community's thinking in the Gospel, the tradition of the Church, and in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council

Anyone may submit a proposal to the Council of the Baptized. Please submit your proposal in writing with your name, email, and telephone number to **info@cccr-cob.org**. You may also mail them to Council of the Baptized, c/o Mary Beth Stein, 5596 Royal Oaks Dr, Shoreview, MN. 55126. Upon acceptance by the Council, a research and drafting team will be assigned to help develop the proposal for final approval by the Council of the Baptized.

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# CATHOLIC WOMEN AND HOLY ORDERS: THE TIME IS NOW



## Introduction

*“The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the [people] of our time... are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well.”*

These opening words from the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* declare that the Church stands in solidarity with all people. For Catholic women, however, this declaration has not materialized into practice within our Church. For many Catholic women, grief remains unacknowledged. Though qualified by Baptism and called by the Holy Spirit, women cannot receive the sacrament of Holy Orders and serve the Church as deacons, priests, or bishops. The Council of the Baptized urges priests, bishops, and lay people to champion the full inclusion of women at all levels of the Church.

## The People’s Concerns

The authors believe that the current Church practice of barring women from the sacrament of Holy Orders stands as glaringly inconsistent with the practices of Jesus. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus demonstrated inclusivity and empowerment of women. He repeatedly rejected human-made, cultural barriers that obstruct full human flourishing. In keeping with these practices of Jesus, we call upon our Church leaders to revise the current rules which prohibit women from the three degrees of Holy Orders: deacon, priest, and bishop. The Church must provide women the ability to answer the call from the Holy Spirit as they experience it. To deny this sacrament to women is both unjust and demeaning to the baptism of women.

Moreover, in keeping with Church tradition and Vatican Council II's call for the Church to engage in the modern world, opening Holy Orders to women more properly reflects the needs and realities of our modern times. Women have successfully stepped into the highest levels of service and leadership in all areas of culture, business, politics, and many Christian denominations. Large numbers of Catholics now yearn to see women step into the highest levels of service and leadership within our Church. Young people especially have little tolerance for barriers based upon sex. Finding Church practices irrelevant to their lived experiences, young people are leaving the Church in ever growing numbers.

Finally, our Church in the modern world must face the reality of decreasing numbers of priests to serve our faith communities. Overworked priests are serving two, and sometimes three, parishes. For lack of priests, many parishes are closing. With fewer priests to serve our parishes, the pastoral and sacramental needs of the faithful are not being adequately served. By opening ordination to women, we would provide a wealth of leadership, pastoral care, and sacramental opportunities to the faithful and thus promote the flourishing of faith life within the Church.

## **The Current Official Position**

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the sacrament of Holy Orders flows from and continues the ministry of the apostles.<sup>1</sup> The sacrament includes three degrees of ministry: episcopate, presbyterate, and diaconate – that is, bishop, priest, and deacon. Holy Orders, which is required to serve in any of these ministries, is presently offered only to men. Two modern documents outline the reasons for the hierarchy's declaration that Holy Orders must be male only: *Inter Insigniores* issued in 1976 by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* issued as an apostolic letter in 1994 by Pope John Paul II.

*Inter Insigniores* (1976) outlines the main arguments that have led the Vatican to the conclusion that only men can receive the sacrament of Holy Orders: (1) Jesus chose only male apostles, (2) ordination has always been only for males in keeping with God's plan for the Church, and (3) only men can fully stand in *persona Christi*. Citing St. Thomas Aquinas, the document states that sacramental signs "represent what they signify by natural resemblance." This leads to the hierarchy's conclusion: "if the role of Christ were not taken by a man; in such a case it would be difficult to see in the minister the image of Christ."<sup>2</sup> Thus they claim that, because of their sex, women cannot fully resemble Christ.

*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994) affirms the main teachings of the prior document by stating that Jesus chose only men as apostles, priests have always been male only, and excluding women from ordination is consistent with God's plan for the Church. Moreover, Pope John Paul II declared this teaching to be definitive, asserting it must be accepted by the faithful.<sup>3</sup> Further dialog on this topic was to be closed.

## **Our Response to the Official Position**

### ***Is this a definitive teaching?***

Although Pope John Paul II claimed this teaching was definitive and must be accepted by the faithful, he neglected to garner consensus among the world's bishops. This teaching also fails to reflect the *sensus fidelium*, the sense of the faithful. According to then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, infallibility as established by the first Vatican Council is shared with the bishops and all the people of the Church.<sup>4</sup> Wide agreement throughout the Church is necessary before requiring belief in a teaching.

The Second Vatican Council further articulates the roles of the bishops and the body of the faithful in determining what must be accepted as a matter of faith. *Lumen Gentium* reminds us that the *sensus fidei* cannot err in matters of belief when "from the bishops to the last of the faithful they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals."<sup>5</sup> According to a Univision poll in 2014, however, consent on the matter of ordaining women is far from universal:

- In Europe, 64 percent of Catholics polled approved of ordaining women.
- In Latin America, 49 percent approved; 47 percent disapproved.
- In North America, 59 percent approved; 36 percent disapproval.

This poll involving 12,000 Catholics from twelve nations found large numbers of people approving of women's ordination.<sup>6</sup> Although some sections of the world, such as Africa, show a majority disapproving of women's ordination, questions are now stirring even in those parts of the world. Nigerian Jesuit priest and theologian, Fr. Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator is speaking up forcefully about including women at all levels of leadership and ministry. He notes, "As long as there's exclusion, we're not whole. We're not complete. We're not an integral body."<sup>7</sup>

Clearly the *sensus fidelium* requirement of universal consent has not been reached. Similarly, the doctrine of reception, which requires that the community must accept a law or rule for it to be an expression of its faith, has not been satisfied.<sup>8</sup> The hierarchy's teaching against women's ordination misses the mark of truth in the faith experience of too many people. As such, dialog around ordaining women must remain open until the Holy Spirit guides the wider Church to more universal acceptance.

### ***Did Jesus choose only men?***

Let us begin by questioning the first assumption of the Vatican documents: did Jesus choose only men to be apostles? The Gospels name "the twelve" as significant followers of Jesus. These twelve have come to be regarded as the apostles. Other New Testament writings, however, expand the definition of apostle beyond our current understanding of "the twelve."

- In 1 Cor. 9:1 Paul identifies an apostle as one who is an eyewitness to the risen Christ and who is commissioned by the

risen Christ for missionary work. Paul himself, although not one of the original twelve, fits this definition of apostle.

- In Acts 1:21, Luke defines an apostle as one who accompanied Jesus in his ministry and who was an eyewitness to the resurrected Jesus.

Women satisfy both definitions. Mary Magdalene, as evidenced in all four Gospels, was eyewitness to the resurrected Christ. She was also commissioned by Christ to announce the Good News. The Apostle Junia as named in Romans 16:7 was also regarded by Paul to be an apostle.

Moreover, the apostles were not priests. Although the concept of priesthood was readily available within the Jewish tradition, Jesus never indicated that his followers were to take on the role or title of priest. Neither did Paul call for priests as the early Church was forming. In fact, as theologian Richard McBrien points out, scripture does not indicate that Eucharist was celebrated only by apostles, "or that a chain of ordination from Apostle to bishop to priest was required for presiding."<sup>9</sup> The concept of an ordained priesthood evolved in later centuries as the Church became more integrated within the surrounding culture.

Similar findings were reached in the 1970s by the Pontifical Biblical Commission. This Commission noted that the New Testament said "very little on the subject of the ministry of the Eucharist." In fact, they found that when the New Testament refers to ministry in the early Church, the word *hiereus* (priest) is not even used.<sup>10</sup> As part of its conclusion, the Commission declared that the New Testament does not offer a clear answer as to whether women can be ordained as priests.<sup>11</sup> Pope Paul VI, finding this result incompatible with his position, dissolved the commission without officially publishing the report. The full report, however, was leaked out and is available.

Several years later, the Catholic Biblical Association of America Study (1979) likewise determined that "ministry was shared in the early church, and priesthood as an institution emerged in its earliest forms only around the beginning of the second century."<sup>12</sup> This study reached three important conclusions:

- Scriptural evidence does not support that women were excluded from ministry.
- The New Testament does not restrict priestly-type functions to “the twelve.”
- Since Jesus spoke neither about priesthood nor about women serving in that capacity, the Vatican’s assertion that Jesus intended to exclude women from the priesthood poses a “most serious logical difficulty.”<sup>13</sup>

To the contrary, the Gospels are filled with examples of Jesus including and actively engaging with women: Mary Magdalene, Martha and Mary, the woman at the well, and so many more.

It is illogical to assume that Jesus intended to restrict ministry by sex while disregarding other factors. As far as we know, “the twelve” were all Jewish free-men, and most likely married. Being Jewish appears to have been important to Jesus since he foretold them judging the twelve tribes of Israel in the coming New Age (Matt 19:28).<sup>14</sup> Yet the early Church embraced Paul’s teaching in Gal 3:28 that, through baptism in Christ, there is no longer a distinction between Gentile and Jew or between slave and free. Thus, Gentiles were welcomed into ministry of the growing early Church; Jewishness was not a requirement. This same verse in Galatians goes on to teach that there is to be no distinction between women and men. This baptismal inclusion, therefore, must be fully extended to women.

### ***Has the priesthood always been male-only?***

A second major assertion by the Vatican documents is that priestly functions have always been male only and have enjoyed full acceptance across the centuries. Archeologists have uncovered evidence, however, revealing women serving as deacons, priests, and even bishops. A fresco found in the Catacomb Via Latina, Rome dated around A.D. 306 depicts a woman dressed in the specific garments of a deacon. The fresco of Vitalia in Naples shows a woman priest celebrating Mass. This is dated between the 4th and

6th centuries. In Rome, the Basilica of St. Praxedis has a mosaic portraying four women including Episcopa - meaning bishop – Theodora (see cover photo). This is a small sampling from the wealth of archeological evidence and artifacts that reveal the reality that women did indeed minister as deacons, priests, and bishops.<sup>15</sup>

Vatican officials note the existence of this evidence but discount it claiming these women were heretics. Such a claim, however, fails to explain why these frescos, mosaics, and other evidence are found within fully Christian catacombs and churches, since heretics were denied a place in these sacred, Christian spaces.

Even in our contemporary times, the Church has ordained women priests. Ludmila Javorová helped keep the Catholic faith alive in the underground church during the communist takeover of Czechoslovakia during the Second World War. She was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Felix Davidek (1921-1988) and served as Vicar General in the underground church for twenty years. In fact, according to Cardinal Miloslav Vlk of Prague in 1991, five or six women were ordained as priests.

Despite danger to herself, Ludmila Javorová persevered in her work as a priest. "It was an extraordinary time," Ludmila recalls. "You cannot understand. For us it was a question of survival. We feared the church would not survive." This underground church had smuggled in documents from Vatican II and responded with deep commitment to the needs of that local church in the modern world.<sup>16</sup> Sadly, when this underground church was allowed to be public again, Ludmila's priesthood was disavowed by the Vatican.

The subsequent movement of women being ordained as priests began in 2002 when, on the Danube River in Germany, seven women were ordained by a then-current male Catholic bishop in good standing within the Church. In 2005 Gisela Forster and Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger were made bishops, again by current male Catholic bishops. The WomenPriest movement quickly came to the United States where they are serving thousands of Catholics in various parts of the country. Today, more than 200 women have been ordained as Roman Catholic priests internationally. The Vatican has excommunicated these women.

### ***What is a “natural resemblance” to Jesus?***

A third major assertion of the Vatican documents is that, since women lack “natural resemblance” to Jesus, women cannot stand *in persona Christi*. This argument identifies the distinguishing and qualifying feature of Jesus as being the maleness of his anatomy rather than the humanness of his being. Recalling Anselm’s theory, however, we believe that Jesus saved all humanity by assuming a *human* nature: that which is not assumed is not saved.

By elevating the maleness of Jesus, notes Elizabeth Johnson CSJ, the very redemption of women becomes suspect: “If maleness is essential for the christic role, then women are cut out of the loop of salvation, for female sexuality is not taken on by the Word made flesh.”<sup>17</sup> The Vatican documents’ emphasis on Jesus’ maleness suggests that women are not fully redeemed. Yet the Catholic Catechism asserts, “*God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism.*”<sup>18</sup> Thus, all baptized Catholics resemble Christ: “The baptized have ‘put on Christ.’ Through the Holy Spirit, Baptism is a bath that purifies, justifies, and sanctifies.”<sup>19</sup> Baptized women have been purified, justified, and sanctified just as men have. The capacity to “put on Christ” comes through baptism, not the sexual anatomy of one’s body.<sup>20</sup>

The assertion that women cannot stand *in persona Christi* has no more merit than claiming gentiles, slaves, or disabled persons lack a “natural resemblance” to Jesus. Indeed, as Augustinian priest, John J. Shea points out, the church’s teaching that “women are not fully in the likeness of Jesus, qualifying as it does as a theological explanation, is utterly and demonstrably heretical.”<sup>21</sup>

The Belgium Bishop’s Commission on Women and the Church (1998) supports inclusion of women and points to different criteria for standing *in persona Christi*. Resemblance to Christ, observes the Commission, arises not in physical features but in the sacramental relationship of liturgy and ritual. Ordaining women would include them in this sacramental relationship, and women would then act *in persona Christi*.<sup>22</sup> Through the sacramental action itself, women would resemble Christ.

Like the Belgian Bishop's Commission, we believe that standing *in persona Christi* arises from non-physical traits. As Phyliss Zagano rightly points out, "It is not the human male Jesus, but the risen Lord who is sign and symbol of every sacrament."<sup>23</sup> The "natural resemblance" any priest must demonstrate is a compassionate heart like Jesus, an attitude of service, and a life of prayer. This is what Jesus called his disciples to imitate. Such a resemblance flows from a call by the Holy Spirit. Many women experience this call, and their lives reveal this primary resemblance to Jesus. However, as the Belgian Bishops Commission further points out, women have not had the opportunity of "letting this personal vocation grow out into a truly ecclesial vocation as happens in the case of men."<sup>24</sup> Church teachings must change to allow the Holy Spirit to move freely among all the faithful; the Church must open the sacrament of Holy Orders to women.

## **Does the Church Ever Change Its Rules?**

Yes! The Church has a long history of changing its rules – simply consider its prior acceptance of slavery or its condemnation of charging interest on loans. Many teachings and practices have been modified: not eating meat on Friday, mass in Latin, no women permitted in the sanctuary, etc. Although the "twelve" were most likely married, the Council of Trent barred priests from being married. Teachings and practices change with the needs and understandings of the times.

The answer to how willingly change can happen lies in one's understanding of how Church rules come to be. Scripture scholar, Raymond E. Brown, describes two very different approaches in how to consider the rules banning women from Holy Orders. The first approach, named "Blue-print Ecclesiology," assumes that Jesus set forth the plans for how the Church should be structured.<sup>25</sup> The hierarchy uses this approach when it claims that, since Jesus did not include any women in "the twelve," Jesus must have intended to limit Holy Orders to men.

To make this claim, Blue-print Ecclesiology relies on the assumption that the pre-resurrection Jesus was omniscient. It assumes Jesus had a

church structure in mind, and that he conveyed this information to his disciples.

This Blue-print approach is greatly weakened by the 1964 Pontifical Biblical Commission which instructs that the “Gospels are to be evaluated as developing first-century tradition, a tradition that begins with Jesus but goes beyond him.”<sup>26</sup> This Pontifical Commission further instructs that “the Gospels do not necessarily report the literal words of Jesus.”<sup>27</sup> As such, the words and actions of Jesus as we read them in the Gospels have likely been shaped by the evangelists, later Church authorities and the entire Christian community. Rather than Jesus laying out the plan for the Church, the Pontifical Biblical Commission asserts that the structure of the Church developed over time.

The findings of the Commission mesh well with Brown’s second approach which he calls “Erector-set Ecclesiology.”<sup>28</sup> This approach asserts that Jesus left no blueprint or instruction other than to serve God’s people. It is up to Christians, as guided by the Holy Spirit, to build the Church in ways that address these needs. During a homily in Oct. 2014, Pope Francis declared, “God is not afraid of new things! That is why [God] is continually surprising us, opening our hearts and guiding us in unexpected ways.”<sup>29</sup> With this approach, the Holy Spirit can guide Christians to make adjustments as necessary to serve the ever-changing realities faced by humanity.

Brown’s “Erector-set Ecclesiology” supports the teachings of *Gaudium et Spes*, which reminds us that “at all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.”<sup>30</sup> This applies not only to the secular world, but must be “felt too on the religious level.”<sup>31</sup> Church teachings and practices must move and change to address the lived experiences of the faithful.

In 1975 the Canon Law Society of America (CLSA) examined the status of women according to Church law. Canon law 968:1 limits Holy Orders to men. Their report concludes that, despite advances made by women in the secular world, the Church’s self-examination regarding the status of women included “only perfunctory, sporadic and uncoordinated efforts to examine its own practices and attitudes.”<sup>32</sup> By denying equal status to women, Church law “fails to

recognize the dignity of women as persons and limits their opportunity for service in the church."<sup>33</sup> This refusal to include women into priestly ministry and decision-making creates a "grave pastoral problem."<sup>34</sup> Canon law presently relegates women to a secondary status which denies their full baptismal dignity and inhibits their ability to live out fully how the Holy Spirit may be calling them. Canon law like Church teachings, however, can be corrected.

## **The Case for Women's Ordination**

### *Scriptural and historical context*

For guidance on how to correct Church rules, let us turn to the examples from Jesus and the experiences of the early Church.

- Luke 10:38-42. Mary sat at Jesus' feet and listened to his teaching while Martha filled the expected female role of hospitality. Jesus upheld Mary's choice to step beyond the usual female role saying, "Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her."
- Mark 7:24-30. The Syrophoenician woman, a gentile, taught Jesus a new perspective. Hearing Jesus' reluctance to heal her daughter, she argued, "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's scraps." Jesus listened to her argument, expanded his thinking, and chose a new course of action. He healed her daughter. Jesus experienced this woman as his teacher.
- John 4:6-26. Jesus not only spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well, which violated cultural norms, he also trusted her with the revelation that he was the Messiah. She answered the call of his trust by going forth and sharing this Good News with her townspeople.
- Matthew 28:10. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were the first to encounter the risen Jesus. He instructed them, "Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me." These women were witnesses of the resurrected Jesus and proclaimed the Good News. According

to the definitions given earlier, they were apostles. (See also, John 20.11-18.)

Jesus' actions resulting from his interchanges and relationships with women showed that he viewed women as empowered persons. His personal relationships with women were direct and tell us how much he valued these women as full participants in sharing the Good News.

Documented experiences of the early Church demonstrate that women participated fully in all areas of Christian life. For example, women led local churches. Paul specifically names Phoebe as a minister of the church at Cenchreae (Rom 16:1). The next verses also name Prisca, Mary, Junia, and other women who led and served the church.

Women also served as deacons. Paul's letter to Timothy describes criteria for women to serve as deacons (1 Tim 3:11). In later centuries, the Council of Chalcedon (451) stated that "no woman under forty years of age is to be ordained a deacon, and then only after close scrutiny."<sup>35</sup> The Second Council of Orleans (533) subsequently ordered that "henceforth no woman may any longer receive diaconal benediction due to the frailty of their sex."<sup>36</sup> These examples clearly point to the existence of women who already had been ordained as deacons. The exclusion of women was not part of the early Church but came later as the Church conformed more to cultural norms.

### ***Current Cultural Context***

Cultural norms have continued to shape the practices of our Church. For example, the Catechism of 1914 reflected the cultural understanding of that time. It stated that women were "inferior in some respects to men both in body and in soul."<sup>37</sup> Yet by the time of Vatican II, the cultural experiences of gender had shifted dramatically.

- Reading the signs of the times, *Gaudium et Spes* reversed the older Catechism and declared, "All women and men are endowed with a rational soul and are created in God's image; they have the same nature and origin and, being redeemed by Christ, they enjoy the same divine calling and destiny; there is here a basic equality between all and it must be accorded ever greater recognition." (*Gaudium et Spes* 29)

- *Gaudium et Spes* goes on to address sexual discrimination specifically. Calling discrimination inconsistent with God's design, the document names sex discrimination first in the list of violations to personal rights. (*Gaudium et Spes* 29)
- In its Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, Vatican II further recognizes the greatly expanded roles of women in the modern world, stating "Since in our time women have an ever more active share in the whole life of society, it is very important that their participation in the various sectors of the Church's apostolate should likewise develop." (*Apostolicam Actuositatem* 9)

These Vatican II teachings, however, have not been translated into practice. Inequality based on sex remains.

The US Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1994 made a start at grasping the problem. They wrote, "Still, the face of the Church reveals the pain that many women experience. At times this pain results from the flawed behavior of human beings – clergy and lay – when we attempt to dominate each other. Women also experience pain because of persistent sexism."<sup>38</sup>

Persistent sexism within our Church hierarchy is a scandal. Women have been defined by their biological roles rather than by personhood, personal agency and autonomy. The men who have held the power to make these decisions do not similarly define and limit themselves. They remain in positions of power over women. These limitations generated by the hierarchy leave no room for the Holy Spirit to move freely in calling women forward to all forms of ministry.

Instead, the hierarchy has generated different reasoning which keeps women out of priestly ministry and decision making positions. They have embraced aspects of complementarity, for example, which see men and women as complementing each other, and deem women to be equal to men...but different. This has allowed the hierarchy to define and limit women's roles according to their sex while retaining the power for themselves to make decisions and offer sacraments. As a result, women are denied leadership. Sexism continues.

While women are limited in the church as being “equal but different” from men, we see women in all other areas of modern life fully able to step into positions of authority, service, and leadership. Indeed, Pope John XXIII reflected that—

Women are gaining an increasing awareness of their natural dignity. Far from being content with a purely passive role or allowing themselves to be regarded as a kind of instrument, they are demanding both in domestic and in public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons.<sup>39</sup>

This reflection on women in the modern world must now be turned inward to examine church practices. Indeed, Pope Francis has declared, “we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church.”<sup>40</sup> For this to truly happen, we must recognize that women’s baptism, natural dignity, and status as human persons qualify them to serve at all levels of the public life of the Church. In fact, as a result of the priest shortage, women are already serving Church life in large numbers as pastoral ministers and administrators. But as Jesuit Thomas P. Sweetser points out, to give women these responsibilities but refuse them ordination is “morally wrong and discriminatory.”<sup>41</sup>

In 1995, the Thirty-fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) examined the situation of women in the Church. Turning to the first creation story in Genesis, in which women are created in God’s own image, as well as noting the mutuality of Jesus’ relationships with women in scripture, they wrote, “The original plan of God was for a loving relationship of respect, mutuality, and equality between men and women.”<sup>42</sup> They go on to declare that there is “an urgency in the challenge to translate theory into practice not only [in the world] but also within the Church itself.”<sup>43</sup> The words of Pope Francis addressing marriage apply equally to the place of women in the Church. He observes, “We need a healthy dose of self-criticism.”<sup>44</sup> While the Vatican frequently calls upon the outside world to better respect women, we echo the Pope’s call for the Church to reflect upon itself and to recognize its own sexism.

Such a self-reflection is vital if the Church hopes to reach out to younger people. In increasing numbers, millennials are not accepting this suppression of women. According to a 2015 Pew survey:

- 58% of millennials aged 30-49 support ordaining women.
- This number swells to 63% among younger millennials aged 18-29.
- In fact, among millennials leaving the Church, 39% cite treatment of women as a factor in their decision.<sup>45</sup>

Stacy Gehringer is a millennial who has left the Church. This 28-year-old Minneapolis woman was raised Catholic but no longer identifies as such. "I remember feeling confused about Catholic teaching and the lack of female leadership, in contrast to the messages I was receiving to be a strong, critically thinking, independent woman," she explains. "This dissonance was one reason I began to drift from the Catholic Church." She began to see the Church as an "institution that places men on a pedestal and undervalues women."<sup>46</sup>

Expressing a similar struggle, Megan Corradi, a 27-year-old professional woman, still identifies as Catholic but feels frustrated and remains distant from the Church: "For me, the church is not a place of empowerment for women. Sexism is embedded in its very structure. The fact that a woman cannot attain the leadership role of a priest (or higher) is the ultimate symbol of this." She goes on to ask an important question: "How is one to formulate a healthy relationship with God using a framework like this as their guide?"<sup>47</sup>

The reality of the modern world for these and so many younger people is that subordination of women will not be tolerated.

A Church truly in step with the realities of the modern world must recognize and accept that the role of women has permanently changed, especially in Western cultures. No longer are women's opportunities limited to the domestic sphere, as they were during biblical times. Women are educated, autonomous, and actively engaged in the public sphere. Women have stepped into leadership in all areas of life – including serving as ministers, priests, and bishops in

other Christian Churches. To continue denying Catholic women access to all roles of leadership and ministry within the Church is an outrage to the inherent dignity of women and risks making the Church an irrelevant institution from the past. Women are stepping up to lead and serve according to how the Holy Spirit calls them despite barriers placed in their way by official documents that do not reflect our modern world.

***The Power of the Spirit's Call***

The Holy Spirit works both within the structure of the Church and also within the faithful who constitute the universal Church. Careful attention must be given to all movements of the Holy Spirit. Vatican documents claim that women who seek ordination are pursuing a mere attraction to the ordained position which "does not suffice for a genuine vocation."<sup>48</sup> The writers of the documents assume these women are not responding to a true call from the Holy Spirit. Their assumption, however, is not borne out in the lives of women who experience the Holy Spirit's call. Following are testimonials from various women who have experienced a call to serve as deacons, priests, or bishops. Answering this call has been a painful challenge.

Sister Carolyn Puccio CSJ has spent her adult life ministering in the diocese of New Ulm and in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. During that time, she has done the work of a deacon, nurturing the faith life of Catholics through scripture reflections, presiding at Word and Communion services, and preparing people for the sacraments of Baptism and Marriage.

*I consistently experienced the call of the community to the role of deacon. It was difficult for people to understand why, when I had been with them throughout the journey, when it came time for the ritual or ceremony I needed to step aside while someone more official, often less familiar to them, presided.*

*I knew I had been given the gifts to preach and preside and was doing the "work" of a deacon and it saddened me deeply that I could not do so with the official blessing of the Church, solely because I was a woman.*

*Carolyn Puccio, CSJ*

Despite experiencing the community's call to the diaconate during the years she served in rural parishes in the New Ulm Diocese, Sr. Carolyn was unable to step into the fullness of her calling. This caused deep sadness for her as well as for those she served. This sense of deep sadness is shared by Connie Walsh, a long-time health care advocate in St. Paul, Minnesota, who has also experienced a strong calling to the diaconate.

*For the last 15-20 years, every time I went to a deacon ordination I felt two very strong emotions. The first being a sense of gratitude that the friend that I had been supporting through his formation was able to follow his heart's desire and was being ordained. And at the same time, I felt an overwhelming sadness that the same Spirit that had called my friend had also called me to this ministry of service BUT I had no option to respond to this call and stay in this church that I loved.*

*Connie Walsh*

Marilyn Wegscheider has also struggled with this limitation. She has ministered to our Church all her adult life. She has been a woman religious, pastoral minister, and preacher. Although she has served in the role of deacon, she has not been ordained. Nevertheless, those around her – including her parish priest - have felt the Spirit in her and have called her to serve.

*I was called to the nursing home when someone died. His spouse asked me to anoint him. "Do you want me to call a priest?" "No," she said, "I want you to do it." So I stepped closer to him, made the sign of the cross on his forehead and hands, and blessed him.*

*Once I was called into the pastor's office the day after a leadership training on ministry in the church. He said: "You would like to be ordained, wouldn't you?" I replied, "Yes!" He was very affirming. He also asked me, "What does Pastor Jan do?" (She's the minister at a nearby Lutheran Church.) I replied:*

*"Everything I do, except she's ordained!" He said:  
"That's painful for you isn't it." Yes, it was a struggle  
and desire I greatly felt and still do as I grow older.*

*Marilyn Wegscheider*

In addition to calling women to be ordained deacons, the Holy Spirit has also called some women forward to be ordained as priests. These women, Catholics who love the Church, had to make exceedingly painful decisions about whether to stay within the Church they loved or follow the insistent call of the Holy Spirit.

To follow this call, these women spent years in study and discernment.

Monique Venne has been ordained a Roman Catholic Woman Priest (RCWP). Like Saul being struck to the ground, Monique experienced her call physically. On Holy Thursday 2005, just following Mass, Monique went to the chapel to pray alone. After giving thanks to God, she says,

*My prayer turned to all who suffer in the Church because their calls to priesthood were being ignored. I began to feel a pressure on my head—it was not physical, but still something that felt different. I shook my head a little to get rid of the feeling, but it persisted. So I began to concentrate on it, and suddenly I thought, "These are God's hands, and I am being ordained." As if in confirmation, I remembered the words, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." The sense of pressure on my head slowly lifted, and I felt like a new person had been born inside me. Thereafter, I tried to find ways to live out my priesthood within the Catholic Church.*

*I made my decision to join Roman Catholic Womenpriests in 2007 when I attended a friend's RCWP ordination—the joy on her face after the ordination rite dissipated all my fear of excommunication, which had kept me from applying to RCWP earlier. When I was accepted by RCWP, I felt a deep peace and healing. I took*

*this manifestation of grace as a sign that I was finally in the right place to live out my priestly calling, and I have never wavered from my decision.*

*Monique Gamache Venne*

Like other women called to the priesthood, Monique had to grapple with the serious conflict between church barriers and her compelling call from the Holy Spirit. She chose the Spirit and has served as a priest for several years.

Mary Smith, a wife, mother, and long-time nurse living in St. Paul, Minnesota, also experienced this call and this conflict.

*I am a Roman Catholic, born to devout Roman Catholic parents. As far back in my life as I can recall, I felt I was in search of something, although I could not identify with any certainty what that something was. I was a seeker responding to a call.*

*It was not until I was in my 50's and entered graduate school to study theology that the call became clearer and the way opened. I became involved with RCWP and engaged in the study requirements toward ordination. In 2008, I was ordained a deacon by Bishop Patricia Fresen, and in 2009, I was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Regina Nicolosi. It was on that August day in 2009 that I suddenly felt the internal congruence that I knew I had been seeking for most of my life. I felt a deep sense of peace.*

*Mary Smith*

In a similar way, Ruth Lindstedt's call by the Spirit has been a theme throughout her whole life. A retired nurse and spiritual director, Ruth experienced her call to the priesthood as a gradual yet persistent unfolding.

*In 2003, I attended to the Spirit's call to become prepared as a spiritual director. Afterward, I returned to my nursing career. But, the Spirit was not finished. After*

*my retirement from nursing in 2009 I became involved with a woman priest faith community in Saint Cloud, MN. As my involvement grew, my desire to become a woman priest also grew. I sought out formal theological preparation and, during my studies of Master of Divinity, the call to ministry as a woman priest only intensified. I committed to the formation program for priesthood with RCWP.*

*I would say that my call to serve as a woman priest was a gradual awakening to the Spirit's desire for me to do God's work.*

*Ruth Lindstedt*

Linda Wilcox experienced her call from the Holy Spirit while she studied theology as an adult. She answered the call with her whole being.

*In 2005 I was present at a Eucharist at which a woman priest from the Old Catholic Rite officiated. This was my "aha" moment. I was stunned and delighted at the same time – someone who looked like me was saying the words of institution! I could not get this image out of my mind, as much as I tried. It finally occurred to me that this was something that I could do – something I desired to the core of my being.*

*Parker Palmer in Let Your Life Speak describes perfectly what my feelings were: "Vocation at its deepest level is, 'This is something I can't not do, for reasons I'm unable to explain to anyone else and don't fully understand myself, but are nonetheless compelling.'"*

*Priesthood for me was like a dog with a bone – it would not let go of me – maybe this was something like Mary felt when the angel told her she was to be the mother of the Messiah. I came to accept that if I wanted to be my most authentic self and live true to my nature, I would have to submit my will to this calling. Submission*

*for me was the only way out – not a grudging submission, but one filled with trust and openness to transformation.*

*I talked at length with my spiritual director about the antagonism I was feeling to the “call.” I was finally able to embrace it as a “gift” I had been given – nothing I did on my own or asked for. It was for me to choose to accept the gift with thankfulness and proclaim, “I am willing.” I was ordained a Roman Catholic Womanpriest in August of 2009.*

*I continue to be grateful for the call and opportunity to show the feminine face of God to the People of God.*

*Linda Wilcox*

In describing her call as a dog with a bone, Linda echoes other women who experience the call to ordination. These are not women interested in status or pursuing a mere attraction to the ordained position; rather, these women are responding to a true call from the Holy Spirit which pursues them until they submit.

To follow this call they have suffered the grief and anguish with which *Gaudium et Spes* calls the Church to stand in solidarity. These women have had to choose either to remain unfulfilled and stay in the Church they love or follow the call and suffer excommunication.

The stories of these women and countless others like them bring to life the words of Francis Quinn, retired bishop of Sacramento: “Women have shown great qualities of leadership, strength, intelligence, prayerfulness, wisdom, sensitivity and knowledge of theology and sacred scripture. Might the teaching church one day, taking account of changing circumstances, be inspired by the Holy Spirit to study and reinterpret its biblical tradition?”<sup>49</sup> The time is now to call for this change in Church teaching and practice. The time is now for women’s ordination.

# Moving Forward

Women have been excluded from the sacrament of Holy Orders based upon Church teachings that do not stand up under scrutiny. These teachings build upon erroneous assumptions and rationales that are not in accord with historical facts, sound reasoning, and good theology. Now is the time for our entire Church – laity, clergy, and hierarchy – to recognize and correct these errors.

- Mary Magdalene and other women were apostles. To claim that Jesus chose only male apostles is erroneous. This claim dismisses important scriptural and historical sources (see page 5 of this paper). **[Historical error]**
- The priestly office evolved over centuries as the Church developed. Moreover, priestly activities were not limited only to apostles. Therefore, the claim that Jesus intended to establish the priesthood directly through apostolic succession makes a false equivalence between the roles of apostle and priest (see page 5 of this paper). **[False reasoning]**
- Since scripture and other early-church sources portray women serving in priestly capacities, to claim that priesthood has always been male only is erroneous. This claim dismisses important scriptural and historical sources (see page 6 of this paper). **[Historical error]**
- To claim that only men can fully stand in *persona Christi* denies the validity of women’s Baptisms. This claim denies scripture and theological tradition (see page 7 of this paper). **[Theological error]**
- To claim that excluding women from ordination must be accepted by faith as a “definitive teaching” is specious because it is built upon claims that do not accord with historical fact, reason, and sound theology. It also builds upon questionable use of scripture. Moreover, it lacks the validation of the *sensus fidelium*. **[Historical error, false reasoning, and theological error]**

Our Catholic Tradition has been built upon faith and reason. We must embrace this rich and life-giving tradition. Now is the time to shine the light of reason and embrace the experience of the faithful; now is the time to open Holy Orders to women.

## **Our Next Steps: If Not Us...Who?**

The time is now. Realities in the modern world have changed. Full inclusion of women is necessary for our Church to remain relevant and to continue building the reign of God here on Earth. The Holy Spirit is calling our Church into the 21st Century, and this discussion must move forward. As it does, let us work together with the Holy Spirit - not stuck in the patriarchy of the past – but moving forward, mirroring the inclusiveness of Jesus to serve the needs of the modern world.

- We call upon our pastors to raise this conversation in each parish.
- We call upon our bishops to raise this conversation in each diocese. Take surveys of all Catholics to gather a clear sense of the faithful.
- We call upon our bishops to raise this conversation at national bishop conferences. Champion full inclusion of women at all levels of the Church.
- We call upon lay Catholics to raise their voices. Make your needs and desires known to your local bishop. Call for the ordination of women. In the words of Pope Francis, "Have courage. Go forward. Make noise.... Go against the tide, and that means making noise."<sup>50</sup>

In baptism, all Catholics are made full members of the Church. It is time for the Church to open all degrees of Holy Orders to women so they too will be able to act on the call of the Spirit. Include women as full members with full possibilities for ministry and servant

leadership. We call upon all the people of God's Church to turn the grief and anguish of women into the joy and hope of fully living as the Holy Spirit calls.

**If not now...when? If not us...who?**

Loving God,  
We look to you with eyes of hope  
knowing that you are the God of surprises.  
We ask that you respond to the needs of our time.  
So many women hear the call of your Holy Spirit  
to serve at all levels of ordained ministry.  
We ask that your whole Church  
honor the genuine call of these women.  
Guide the hearts and minds of our Church leadership  
to open the sacrament of Holy Orders to women.  
Guide us, your people, and energize us  
to make a loud noise for women's ordination.  
Now is the time. We are your people.  
We thank you for your ongoing guidance and Wisdom.  
Amen.

## End Notes

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