

The Struggle for the Ordination of Women in the Catholic Church within a renewed ordained ministry

Marilyn Hatton 19/1/09

OCW is a national group of women and men who are committed to promoting informed debate on issues relating to the ordination of women into a renewed priestly ministry in the Catholic Church. We advocate for ordination of Catholic women through conferences, publications, media releases, lectures, seminars and public actions.

We were founded in 1993 by Marie Louise Uhr and Zoe Hancock. Sadly Marie Louise Uhr died in July 2001, having lead OCW for eight years as national convener. We are ever indebted to the excellent and meticulous scholarship Marie Louise produced as a base for the future. While I quote her directly in this paper, I also draw extensively on her scholarship throughout the paper.

OCW appreciates the opportunity the Freilich Association has given us to talk to you about this important topic and thank them profusely.

We wish to emphasize though, that we are not academics like all the scholars you have been listening to, but professional women and parents, like yourselves.

The work we do, is driven by conscience, a passion for justice and the gift of faith. It is done a voluntary basis supported by membership subscriptions and donations.

Our concern is passing on the faith to future generations and the vital role women's leadership plays in this, and most importantly the impact that this would have on the status of women worldwide, and world peace.

This positions us at the interface of gender equality and freedom of religion.

Women's equality in 2009 is accepted in most western societies as a human rights issue. The norm, women are recognized, valued and remunerated for making very real and unique contributions at all levels in society, including at the most senior levels of leadership. Women's position in secular society therefore can't help but interact in complex ways with practices of faith that deny women's place in church decision-making.

Many women and men now are increasingly frustrated with a Church practice that is no longer meaningful or credible in an educated, technological and global society.

The institutional Catholic Church seems to be dominated by a hierarchical episcopate that often absolves itself of responsibility, is dismissive of those who try to bring about some accountability and transparency, and that sometimes does not act to reflect the radical message of freedom that Christ preached.

The Catholic Church is the largest Christian faith group in the world with 1.2 billion members and is extremely influential. It is one of the last of the Christian churches to ordain women to Ministry at this point in history, (women were admitted to orders in the early Catholic Church as I will demonstrate). Their exclusion of women in leadership dishonors women.

If the Catholic Church's bishops and cardinals had the courage to honor women by including them in leadership and decision-making it would be a powerful example for other faiths and influence them to question and change their practices towards women. This would do much to improve the

status of women worldwide.

A large percentage of Catholics feel that the Church has failed to lead responsibly due to a lack of understanding of the challenges that impact on the daily lives of its members, both laity and its priests. It has failed to read 'the signs of the times' and to recognize that an educated laity will not accept a dictatorial argument. It has failed to understand the nature of its betrayal of children and parents in paedophilia cases. It has not made adequate provision for the pastoral care of the faithful, even though psychologically suitable celibate male candidates for priesthood are almost non-existent and the current priesthood is ageing and dying.

These failures, coupled with the Vatican's refusal to dialogue and discuss women's ordination and equal leadership, are viewed as contradictory by people who believe in a God of love and liberation.

Thousands of people (without exaggeration) are reaching out for a relevant and spontaneous practice of faith but are stifled and turned away by many of the church's positions on issues that concern them on a daily basis. This creates dissonance for them and leaves them in a spiritual void.

Our vision, is a faith community that nurtures values of equality, inclusiveness, understanding and tolerance, one which encourages a transcendent spirituality that is imbued with a sense of compassion and the ability to reach beyond oneself to find spirituality in love and respect for each other and God's world.

We believe a renewed ordained ministry with women and men having an equal role in leading the Church is integral to sustaining the precious

gift of the Catholic faith that has formed us. A renewed ordained ministry would revitalize pastoral care and sacramental ministry.

Such a ministry could contribute much to the complex and urgent challenges individuals, communities and the world face. These challenges include the pervading sense of loneliness and alienation rife in the western world, the dominant materialism and consumerism, the lack of understanding and tolerance of issues around divorced and remarried peoples, same sex couples, the use of contraception and prevention of HIV/ AIDS, particularly in developing countries where the disease so unjustly impacts on women and children. These, as well as the global issues of the interfaith dialogue between Muslims, Jews and

Christians etc, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the increasing deterioration of our environment, and the lack of peace in so many

countries.

An obvious question for many is... why stay with the Catholic Church? why not as some have done, join one of the other Christian churches or don't bother at all?

My answer to that is:

`if you are reared and formed in a faithyou don't want to go anywhere else, Catholicism is my spiritual and cultural home, my community. It is what I am loyal to...it is what I am shamed by...to shift though.....has all the effects of displacement and loss of identity. I used to walk to daily mass with my grandmother and then with my father, I had uncles and aunts who were priests and nuns who I respected and loved, and who were great fun. The language and humor of my childhood was Catholic. I don't want to separate from that.!!!

I am sure many people of other faiths would have a similar response to mine. But for me it is, the Catholic faith, based on the gospel message that has such potential for freedom, responsibility, love and respect and whose culture is so rich in music, art, architecture.`

And therein lies the complexity of this gender/faith interface. Not only for women but for the priests and bishops too!!!! because if priests and bishops support the idea of a renewed priestly ministry, at the moment, it may require displacement and loss of identity. So fear and loss are key elements of this process.

It is not a pragmatic two sided battle; it is far more complex. I don't know if any of you have been watching the replays of the *Brideshead Revisited* TV series. In the last episode there is a scene with Lady Julia Flyte and Charles Ryder that so captures the relentless and overwhelming impact of believing oneself to be in a state of sin.

The guilt finally forces Julia to break off her relationship, the pain is palpable but so also is Ryder's pain not only because of the break-up but also because of his understanding of the inevitability of her decision as a close observer of the family's commitment to the faith.

Many priests' and bishops' obedience to the Vatican's directives is embedded in their identity in a similarly profound way and because they are very culturally cocooned it is extremely difficult to leverage beliefs associated with women's ordination.

Over the weekend I saw John Patrick Shanley's movie of his play *DOUBT*.

People will read it in different ways but I think he brilliantly captures the Catholic culture of the period, the sense of community. He also exposes the way the clericalism of then and now has developed to suppress the mature development of some clergy to the point that they cannot distinguish when their behavior moves beyond pastoral care to criminal behavior, abuse of trust and inappropriate use of power. The film profoundly captures the layers of complexity involved in dealing with such situations pastorally.

Some priests sadly make a decision to maintain their status quo, consciously or unconsciously, and there is an element of denial and dishonesty in such a stance.

A very significant number of other priests though, are supportive of change to an inclusive ministry, they have gone through a process of the emptying of self to other and experienced the gospel message through reaching out to others and the natural world.

These priests and bishops see the destructive and no longer appropriate elements of the present clerical ministry, they are convinced that the gospel message and the spirit are all encompassing, for them it becomes a response to conscience and takes precedence over constructed doctrines.....

Whatever the situation is though, it is an enormous step to shift to explore the arguments for ordination of Catholic women and a renewed priestly ministry, and an even greater step to do something about it. Under the present threat of excommunication, displacement and loss of identity would be very real for most. Not forgetting, that priests don't have wives and families to support them through a career change and with a vow of poverty most have not accumulated any capital or wealth for security, added to that, their resumes don't translate well in a market driven employment market.

I want to be clear that I am not defending clericalism, it is more that I know many committed priests

and bishops. Importantly, I am convinced that we will not be able to make the urgently required changes unless we continue to seek greater understanding of each other's situation and work together.

That aside, last year, a petition including a point on the consideration of the ordination of Catholic women went to the Australian Bishops Conference. This petition was signed by 16,800 mass going Catholics and over 160 priests including some of Australia's most senior priests. In addition, OCW's latest pamphlet spelling out the position of a renewed ordained ministry including women, was sent to all bishops in Australia. While the response was not overwhelming, six bishops responded with letters sympathetic and supportive of the perspectives put.

The point I make here, is that even though the decision to act upon their conviction is difficult and requires considerable courage, many are doing so.

In answer to the question, why religion at all? History indicates that religion has much to offer our divided world. This is not to say that a practice of faith suits all. Many wonderful lives have been lived without a practice of faith and have made great contributions to humanity.

However, a life lived with an understanding of God's love, belief in life after death, a regular practice of faith that allows reflection on the challenges of life about values of kindness and respect, is a gift..... and supports individuals, communities, societies, democracies and ultimately world peace.

So in OCW's view on the gender/faith interface it is noteither/or it is both/and. (the one and the other/as well as).

Slide of Australian Bishops WYD

The current situation, however, as this slide from the WYD mass last year at Randwick indicates is certainly not inclusive. At the moment

* Virginia Woolf reference from Three Guineas speaking of the Judiciary, the Aristocracy and the Church and power influence of costume and dress

* All decision making is undertaken by the episcopate directed by the Vatican, if you are not ordained you don't enter into decision-making.

* Women do 75% of all the pastoral care in the Catholic Church in Australia but the discussion of the ordination of women is forbidden on church premises.

* An announcement from the Vatican as recently as May last year stated that any women ordained or the bishops who ordain them will be excommunicatedvery threatening indeed for people of faith and commitment.

* Subsequently, in October last year a very senior and respected catholic priest, Father has been threatened with ex-communication for supporting one of the contra-legem women who was ordained in the United States last year.

So what do we do as an organization to influence this agenda?

One the strategies to leverage this situation is to look at the barriers the church raises and to explore the evidence that supports these positions. If we examine the history of ordination in the Catholic

Church, there is strong evidence that indicates women in the early church were accepted into the diaconate and thus received holy orders.

Lets first look at

1. Jesus and Women:

(a) In the ancient world, particularly in traditional Judaism, patriarchy and male dominance was the norm. The Jewish male was:

*Head of the family

*He could divorce his wife with minimal process and marry another

*He had complete control over his children

*Only men could inherit

Women were worse off under the Jewish law than Roman law. A Roman woman could inherit and she also enjoyed the freedom to be promiscuous

(b) Jesus attitude to women was most unusual for his time. He treated women as equals. There is no doubt that there were many women among the group of disciples who followed him during his ministry, there is strong evidence that they were at the last supper, and it was a group of women, not the apostles who had run away, who followed him to the crucifixion. "Meanwhile standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clophas, and Mary Magdalene" (John 19: 25). And at the Resurrection it was a woman again, Mary Magdalene, who first proclaimed the risen Jesus to Peter (John 20: 1-2).

(c) There were many incidents where Jesus treats women as equals and mixes with them as friends and/or colleagues. For example

*the woman at the well in Samaria in John's gospel (4:1-42). She becomes an apostle to the Samaritans.

*In the house of Mary and Martha Jesus meets, perhaps for the first time, a woman who, like the men who sit at his feet, wants to be a disciple. Jesus is impressed by this and encourages her 'discipleship' even if it runs counter to conventional expectations of a woman's role (Luke 10,38-42; see also 8,1-3).

*We can be sure that Mary, Jesus' mother, had a great influence on him. Jesus learned many of his ideals from her. She must have encouraged him when he began his public ministry.

From all these and other texts we can see that the historical Jesus was very much aware of the concerns of women. He cared about them. He learned from them. He recognised in their needs, and their suggestions, promptings by the Spirit. The forgiveness and reconciliation he brought from his Father, were as much for women as for men. **]. See especially Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women around Jesus*, London 1982.

(c) However, this does not mean that Jesus was a 'feminist' or a social revolutionary with regard to women. In that sense he was a man of his time. His approach was essentially theological and religious and he had no time for antiquated and out of date religious structures. For Jesus

Every Christian - woman or man - was baptized into the very life structure of Jesus himself. All were called to follow him even to persecution and death (Mark 10:16- 22) and all were to participate in his priesthood (I Peter 2:5-9). This common priesthood came through the sacrament of baptism not holy orders. For Jesus and for the New Testament this is the absolute starting point: the radical equality of all Christians.

2. So now lets look also to Paul and Women:

(a) Paul was a man of his time, brought up in the core of the Jewish tradition. He was strictly educated, 'a Pharisee of the Pharisees'. But he was a Diaspora Jew, born in Tarsus, nowadays in southern Turkey just north of Syria. As such, he tended to be more broad-minded, more open to the cosmopolitan Greco-Roman world which surrounded him.

Nevertheless, in Paul's Jewish world the difference between Jew and gentile, slave and free, male and female represented the deepest class and religious divisions of society. Paul accepted all of this until his conversion experience on the road to Damascus. This was the most profound experience of his life, an absolute turning-point.

*Paul now saw clearly that Christ had established a totally new reality in which the old Jewish distinctions were no longer valid. In Christ people are "RE-CREATED".

"For neither circumcision nor un-circumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything ... As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 6:15; 3:27-28).

This is what the 'new creation' in Christ means: the abolition of all distinctions, ranks and races.

3. If we now move to Sub-Apostolic Times - about 65 to 175 AD:

(a) The first thing we have to realize about the early church

*is that the situation was very fluid,

*that there was not a strict demarcation of roles,

*that to some extent structures differed from place to place

*that regular community meetings - including the celebration of the Eucharist - were held in large homes or halls/warehouses e.g. San Clemente

*or, during persecution, in the catacombs.

The leader of this celebration gradually became identified with what we would call a 'bishop'. In the early period this leader might be / probably would be the owner of the house, and there is historical and archeological evidence that some of these were women e.g. the catacombs of Priscilla and Domatilla. In some of the larger cities like Rome there were probably a couple of communities with similar structures.

That early Church structures were relatively indeterminate goes at least some of the way towards explaining how women were able to exercise religious authority. What is clear is that women

occupied significant leadership roles within the community as long as Christianity remained primarily a religion of the private sphere' (Damien Casey, 'The "Fratro Panis" and the Eucharist as Eschatological Banquet').

N.B.(b) The essential conclusion from this is that we can't read back into the early church the ministerial model we have today of male bishops, priests and deacons.

(c) So ... it is true that while there were no women priests in the early church, it is also true that, in the strict sense, there were no male priests either.

4. Looking at Primitive or 'early' Catholicism (Ernst Käsemann)^{3C}:

(a) This is the period in which ministerial forms and functions began to become fixed and a more settled structure emerged. The German Protestant scholar Ernst Käsemann calls this 'primitive Catholicism' by which he means that the ecclesiastical structure characteristic of Catholicism was beginning to form. He says that this is coterminous with the decline in eschatological expectation among Christians, i.e. Christians no longer expected the imminent second coming of Christ in judgment and the end of the world. With this expectation no longer in the forefront of their consciousness it is natural that they would have moved from a free-wheeling structural model of church to a more established one with a set-pattern of life and belief.

(b) Essentially what emerged was a structure led by

*bishops (episcopoi) ... and

*deacons (diakonoi).

Women were also part of this whole structure

*deaconesses

*widows

(c) In Romans 16:1-16 Phoebe was a diakonos at a church near Corinth, as well as the diaconal work of several other women. Women also clearly held the office of prophet in the New Testament. This was an official function in the church, not just some type of charismatic nonsense. Saint Paul placed the prophet between the apostle and the teacher: By the end of the sub-apostolic period the office of prophet seems to have fallen out of use. What emerges is the role of widows.

(e) Although the 'diaconate' in a wider sense existed from the beginning, it is clear that during the second century AD it was the 'order of widows' who exercised their function, in a rather undefined sense.

5. So there is a Clear Emergence of Women Deacons since the beginning: As not only the history indicates but also Archaeological records demonstrate.

Slides of Deaconesses

(a) Cardinal Jean Daniélou, SJ, commenting on the passage from I Timothy who was a recognized world expert on the early church, says unequivocally:

'The word "deacon" is here used in its technical sense. It also seems clear that by "the women" in

question, who are clearly distinguished from the wives of the deacons while the description of them is parallel to that of the deacons, we must understand deaconesses. It indicates a ministry which forms part of the ordained ministry itself' (Jean Daniélou, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, Faith Press, Leighton Buzzard 1974, p. 14).

This has also pretty much been conceded by Benedict XVI when he was prefect of the CDF.

(d) In the Eastern Byzantine Church women deacons were much more common and lasted well into the 8th and 9th centuries.

NB(i) Women deacons are clearly recognized at the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451). The council relaxed the demand that a woman be sixty before ordination. A forty-year-old could now be ordained.

(ii) The non-ecumenical Council of Trullo held in Constantinople in 692 re-affirmed the minimum age set by the Council of Chalcedon for women deacons. (e) We also have the names of just over 100 women deacons (See 'Women Deaconesses in Historical Records'). Women deacons were common in southern Byzantine Italy right up until the 9th century.

In conclusion the historical record indicates the early church was not the clerical model we have today there were no priests as such and that within the model that operated men and women shared equal roles as late as the 9C. The priestly model as we know it did not start to emerge until the 4C.

Break I thought at this point it might be a good idea just in case you are feeling drowsy, given the hour and the hot summer afternoon, to have a bit of a buzz session to keep you interested.

So I am going to ask you to stand up and move around a bit and discuss a question with the person next to you for five minutes and we will then highlight some of points arising in the larger group.

Can you think of times when gender/ faith issues have arisen or could arise in your classroom, what are some of the ways you would deal with them?

***** **

Return So that little and very useful snapshot of the history of ordination in the Catholic church, presents a very different picture to that portrayed by the Vatican to-day. Over the centuries the church has become more and more clericalised and in our time has operated in a more and more centralized ways with the power of Vatican being the all pervading influence.

Clearly, we can't cover all the history between those early centuries and now, to-day, but before we leave the history, given our cause and the strength of the opposition to it I think it is important to note that the Church's understanding has been limited, even erroneous, as it was in the case of slavery when it lagged behind secular understandings of justice by almost a hundred years.

The Church's eventual response to slavery indicates that it can change. OCW leading in these circumstances means questioning the adherence to the Christian virtue of `obedience`.

Dr Marie Louise Uhr, our Founder, in her paper OBEDIENCE A QUESTIONABLE VIRTUE suggests that

'a Christian theology which preaches an obedient Christ and upholds obedience to authority as a major virtue has led to authoritarian church structures, which have encouraged church members to uphold obedience, rather than conscientious discernment, as the primary response to orders from both church and civil authorities. And this has had disastrous consequences for large segments of society.' (p.1)

Marie Louise argues convincingly that

'church authorities not only need to hear criticisms of their rulings such as that on

women's ordination, they also need to question the basic assumptions about the virtue of 'obedience'. Challenging the assumption that 'obedience' is fundamental to a Christian identity is equally necessary for the health of our church. Furthermore it is clearly consonant with our scriptural tradition.' (p.8)

Forty-five years ago (1962-65), the Second Vatican Council called the Church community to eliminate discrimination against the 'other' as contrary to God's intent. Millions of Catholics were galvanized by the bold new vision of a Church 'reading the sign of the times' that called for 'the fundamental rights of the person'.

Since then, sadly, the Vatican has declared with increasing firmness, that the Catholic Church has no authority to confer priestly ordination on women and that this teaching based firmly on scripture, has been held for two thousand years. The Declaration Inter Signiores set out this position in 1976 with Pope Paul VI; in 1994 Pope John Paul II restated it in his Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* and added that the teaching was to be held 'definitely' by the faithful. In 1995 the CDF declared in a *Responsum* that this teaching was not only part of the deposit of the faith but it was taught infallibly. The latest statement, in May (2008) reinforces these stances with threats of excommunication for women and the bishops involved.

The Church's arguments to exclude women from priesthood that have arisen since Vatican II are not sustainable, as our examination of the history and scholarly examination of the scriptures indicate. (In 1976 the Pontifical Biblical Commission, followed by the American Catholic Biblical Association in 1979 and the Catholic Biblical Association of Australia in 1995, all concluded that there was no biblical evidence to support women's exclusion from priestly ministry.)

So there is no barrier to the ordination of Catholic Women. NIHIL OBSTAT.

Women's response in Australia and in the International community.

Since we were established in 1993 OCW has hosted National and International (Hobart) conferences produced publications, established and maintains international links, and responds to all relevant issues. Examples to speak to include:

* The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference commissioned research into women's participation in the Church. In 2000 it published the outcomes of this research in an outstanding publication *Women and man: one in Christ Jesus 2000*. OCW contributed to submissions and consultations and has worked to try to ensure recommendations arising were implemented. Sadly many haven't been realized.

* Alternate Synod 2004, reinforcing the need for inclusive language

- * The National Council of Priests Discussion Paper 2005
- * Partnership with Catholics for Ministry 2007, papers and input
- * WYD 2008, demonstration paper and press releases and interviews.

Slides of WYD demonstration

- * Review of the SDA 1998/2008 which is recommending a process to change existing exemptions to a general limitations clause.
- * Later this month: Submission to Freedom of Religion and Belief in the 21st Century discussion Paper: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission HREOC. The supplementary paper: The intersection between freedom of religion and gender equality. This process will contribute to the World Parliament of Religions in Melbourne, December 2009.
- * Representation on Women's Ordination Worldwide. (WOW) was founded at the First European Women's Synod at Gmunden, Austria, in 1996. It is an ecumenical network of national and international groups whose primary mission at this time is the admission of Roman Catholic women to all ordained ministries. WOW is founded on the principle of equality. It has hosted two international conferences (Dublin 2001 and Ottawa 2005). WOW presented a petition to the Vatican urging the Pope to ordain women to the diaconate at the time of the Synod of the Word in 2008. Planning for WOW's Third conference in L. A. USA in 2010 is well underway.
- * Housetop International Website extraordinaire
- * The Roman Catholic Women's Priests Movement
- * OCW website and shift to an electronic organization 2009.

In Summary

OCW and many other Catholic groups are committed and struggling to keep the vision of Vatican II alive in the Catholic Church.

Our methods are to speak out from the sources to educate and lead on this crucial issue. Holy Disobedience Really !!!!

We urge our Australian bishops not to be threatened but to act with integrity and to stand together and trust that God will guide them. We support them to argue for opening the dialogue not only on women's equal participation in leadership of the church but also on the reshaping of the existing clerical ministry.

We hope this leaves you with an understanding of the importance and complexity of the interface between gender equality /religious freedom and the crucial roles it plays in raising the status of women worldwide and world peace.

As teachers you are pivotal in mediating the space between gender equality and religious freedom. We hope this talk helps you to tackle this with renewed vigor.

As a parting gesture I am going to leave you with two final questions to ponder:

The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines `bigotry` as :

Obstinate or unreasonable adherence to a religious or other opinion; narrow minded intolerance.

My questions are:

* Is the denial of ordination of women in the Catholic Church about bigotry? doctrine? or sinful sexism?

* Does the Catholic Church which is so influential and powerful have some responsibility to lead in improving the status of women in the world in similar ?

Slide of Spanish Cardinal in charge of Congregation of Doctrine of Divine Worship, the man we will have to convince to resume ordaining women to the diaconate.

Bibliography

Collins, John N (1992) Are All Christians Ministers?, EJ Dwyer Pty Ltd: Sydney.

Collins, Paul (1997) Papal Power

Johnson, Elizabeth A (1992) She Who Is: the mystery of God in feminist theological discourse, Crossroad: New York.

Moore Sebastian (2007) The Contagion of Jesus: Dartman, Longman and Todd. London.

Schillebeeckx, Edward(1992) The Church with a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry, Crossroad: New York, 205ff

Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference (2000) Report Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus.

Documents of Vatican II, The Church Today.

Ruether, Rosemary Radford (2005) 'The Church as

liberation community from patriarchy: the praxis of ministry as discipleship of equals', presented at the Women's Ordination Worldwide Conference in Ottawa (2005).

Uhr, Marie Louise (1998) 'Obedience a questionable virtue'.

OCW Pamphlets, 'A Gospel To Be Proclaimed' (1995)

and 'The Hour Has Come' (1997).