Women Priests
Answering the Call

Catherine Cavanagh
# Table of Contents

Preface .................................................................................................................. 4

Women Priests: An Introduction ........................................................................ 5

Why It Matters ..................................................................................................... 7

The Apostolate, Scripture, and Tradition ...................................................... 9

Crime and Punishment: A Little Recent History ........................................ 14

Conscience .......................................................................................................... 19

Excommunication .............................................................................................. 23

Men, Women, the Church and God .................................................................. 26

Mythical Language .............................................................................................. 29

The Risk of Blasphemy ...................................................................................... 31

Women at the Well ............................................................................................. 33

The Woman with the Haemorrhage (Luke 8:43-48): Claiming Our Place .... 37

Conclusion: Renewing the Church .................................................................... 38

Appendix One – Mary Magdalene: A Reflection For Women Called to the Priesthood ................................................................. 40

Appendix Two – God’s Hand: A Reflection for Married Men (And Others) Called to The Priesthood ........................................................................ 43

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................... 45

Bibliography, Contacts and Resources for Further Information ...................... 46
Preface

This is meant to be a book of hope, offered in the belief that the Roman Catholic Church brings goodness and faith alive in the world. But it is a book born in sadness as well, recognizing that we have much to do in our house to truly be the Church God calls us to be.

The Catholic Church introduced me to God, and first helped me understand the experience of the divine. But it also reinforced in me as a child the idea that women and men are separate, and that somehow men are closer to God. I learned as I grew older that this could not be the truth, whatever the Church might teach, and that the altar remained the altar for all, not just men. To think otherwise belied all the other truths of God that I knew, and all the other wisdom of God that the Catholic Church had taught me.

So I did what all good Catholics should do. I studied, reflected, prayed and informed my conscience. And in writing this booklet, I am pursuing the second fundamental teaching of the Church on conscience, to follow it no matter what the cost.

I do so in the hopes that the Vatican will listen. I use the word ‘Church’ interchangeably in this booklet, sometimes to mean the Magisterium (Vatican) and sometimes to mean the people of God (true Church). I believe the context will make clear what sense I mean. In the end, the goal is to bring both together so that we may be the one Church we were always meant to be.

‘In accord with the knowledge, competence and pre-eminence which they possess, [lay people] have the right and even at times a duty to manifest to sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church, and they have a right to make their opinion know to the other Christian faithful, with due regard to the integrity of faith and morals and reverence toward their pastors, and with consideration for the common good and the dignity of persons.’

(Canon 212, CCC #907)
Women Priests: An Introduction

“Only a baptized man validly receives sacred ordination. The Lord Jesus chose men to form the college of the twelve apostles, and the apostles did the same when they chose collaborators to succeed them in their ministry. The college of bishops, with whom the priests are united in the priesthood, makes the college of the twelve an ever-present and ever-active reality until Christ's return. The Church recognizes herself to be bound by this choice made by the Lord himself. For this reason the ordination of women is not possible.” (# 1577 Catechism of the Catholic Church)

Silence.

No female voice, no female hand, no female presence disturbs the serenity of the Catholic altar. So it was, so it is, so it shall always be. “Amen,” mumbles the pope with his cardinals.

And the Church fails God once again.

Here lies the truth: the Church does not call a priest to priesthood. God calls. Only God. Always God.

Any limitations placed on the priesthood are limitations placed on God. Never separated from the people, God suffers as humans suffer.

The Church has often failed its God: Echoing the disciples who would drive the children from Jesus, mimicking the apostles who would keep Elijah, Moses and Jesus in a tent on a mountaintop for themselves, re-enacting the friends who refused to call upon their Lord and follow Peter onto the water, the Church has frequently misunderstood their mission. As God strives to free us, we humans strive for control. Such, it seems, is the nature of humanity. We should not be surprised, but neither should we be accepting.

Throughout Catholic history, the people of God, the Sensus Fidelium, have time and time again called their Church back to accountability. In the radical formation of monastic movements, in the round tables
of the Council of Trent, and in the hope and joy of the second Vatican Council, the people of God reached out and led the Church away from sin and back to God.

We stand at such a crossroads again. As the backlash to the liberation of Vatican II whips our Church, we must reject the Golden Calf we have built to our male hierarchy. We are a people of community, of inclusion, of peace. We are men and women of God. We are all God’s potential priests.

And the call belongs to God.
Why It Matters

Any number of Catholics will agree that the ban on the ordination of women defies both reason and faith. But generations of Catholics have been willing to wait for another day rather than call for it themselves. Women who felt the call to the priesthood were cautioned to wait for another Pope, another time, a future life. Issues of poverty, war, abortion, disease – all seemed to press more urgently than the cause of women priests.

Yet the question of women’s ordination is a fundamental marker of who we are as Church. If we leave the door open to the oppression of women in the Church, then we leave the door open to every injustice, every evil, every action that goes against God.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus reminds us of who we are called to be. The Beatitudes connect all those isolated and marginalized by injustice, and tell us that these are to be the central concern of our discipleship. With the marginalized and forgotten, we shall find blessings. There, we shall find God.

The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake are bound together even in their individual suffering by being placed beneath the concern of society. And they are held together in the hands of a God who calls us to break our silence, to call for justice, to end the pain.

Too often those at the bottom of the heap of injustice are women. Women of passion, women of strength, women of imagination, women of hope, bound to silence by a social structure upheld by the Catholic Church. Women are separate. Women are secondary. Women should be silent.

If we hold silence on the issue of women’s ordination, we undermine the beatitudes, and we risk ignoring the cry of every poor and marginalized child of God. If we hold silence, we allow the possibility of oppression, the possibility of domination, the possibility of the suffering and
never ending torture of the cross.

Catholicism is a religion of justice, based on the call of the Spirit of God throughout the ages, binding us to each other, to every other religion, to the knowledge and experience of God. Catholicism is a religion where the Other is not forgotten, not distanced, not marginalized, not ostracized, not excluded. At least this is what Catholicism is meant to be.

But in the sinfulness of humanity the hierarchy can forget that the Church does not belong to them. They may think the people have become theirs to control, to order, to sanctify, and if necessary to limit and exclude.

This is wrong. Ours is a Church open to the winds of the Spirit, open to the signs of the times, open to the chaos of a complex reality filled with the wonder of each unique person, and their personal relationship to God. Called to be there for the stranger, called to recognize what the philosopher Levinas names the unique trace of God reflected in each other, called to open our hearts to the indescribable warmth of the Divine, we do wrong to interfere with any person's call.

When we speak for women’s ordination, we speak of the truth of the Divine, of the connectedness of all things, of the sanctity of the Earth, of an end to violence, of an embracing of hope, faith and love. This is our Catholic Church. This is what we speak for.

Conscience requires it. God expects it. We can do no less.

---

In Canada, in 2008, the average income for women employed full-time was $44,700. The average income for men employed full-time was $62,600.

Statistics Canada, Average Earnings by Sex and Work Pattern.

www.statscan.gc.ca

What if we discover that our present way of life is irreconcilable with our vocation to become fully human?

Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 61.
The Apostolate, Scripture, and Tradition

Did Jesus choose *men* to be his apostles? Or did he choose *humans*? The Catholic hierarchy builds its argument against the ordination of women on the principle that God chose men alone, specifically men, and only men. Therefore women cannot follow the apostolic calling and women cannot be priests. The Church claims that it is ‘bound’ by Jesus’ decision to call only male apostles (CCC 1577). By placing the blame on Jesus and the first apostles, the Church abdicates responsibility for its own decision to exclude women, ignores the calling of God and truth of history, and nails Christ to the cross once again.

Is this really what Jesus wanted? Could the Christ of all people, the one who healed the suffering, comforted the afflicted and spoke for justice, really have wanted to separate man from woman, to categorize one above the other, silencing, controlling and marginalizing women? Is this what Jesus meant when he chose to read Isaiah 61:1-2 first, out of all of scripture: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19)?

Jesus could not choose this passage first among all others, and yet still uphold the silence, exclusion and oppression of women in the Catholic Church.

---

Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women who told this to the apostles; but these words seemed to them and idle tale, and they did not believe them.

(Luke 24:10-11)
Church. Jesus rejects the silencing of women (and of all persons), and in the words of Isaiah emphasizes that freedom for one involves recovery of sight for the other. The freedom and empowerment of women depends on the Vatican’s rejection of their self-imposed blindness. The Church’s continued rejection of women’s voices lies in radical defiance to Jesus’ liberating life-giving call to all people regardless of gender, regardless of race, regardless of sexuality, regardless of all the barriers of difference that humans create for each other.

Jesus’ words ring with their exhortation to freedom and hope. We are called to liberate captives not create them. We are called to a world where no one is silenced, where no one is captive, where no one is blind. Scripture rebukes our attempts to separate man from woman, Jew from Greek, slave from free (cf. Gal 3:28). We have no right to say women cannot be priests. We have no right to silence and oppress. We have no right to blind ourselves to the presence of God in each other.

Jesus does not speak of priests at all when describing his followers. The Catholic priesthood is a construct of later years, created in hope, but now tainted with the power and bureaucracy of the Vatican. The earliest ordained leaders were called deacons and presbyters, the historical term for priest. In the faith of Jesus, the poor, the meek, the grieving, the suffering, the oppressed and the lowly take precedence. Apostleship, and all terms associated with it, is a call to service, never to power.

What then of the male apostles? Before his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus chose twelve males, it is true, all of Mediterranean descent, to be the first apostles. But he does not say that only those twelve may be his apostles. He does not say that all future apostles must be male, or Mediterranean, or of a certain age, or all married (like Peter) or all single (like Paul). And the risen Christ called women first, before all men, to

Is this not the fast that I choose: To loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall answer; you shall cry and he will say, Here I am.

(Isaiah 58:6-9)
bring his message to the world.

All four gospels tell the story of Mary Magdalene at the tomb, first to meet the risen Lord, first to tell the Gospel of resurrection, first to be sent to the world in the name of Christ. Is this not what a priest is called to do? To bring the sacrament of Christ to the world? To preach the word? To call the faithful to God? To speak the words of the Spirit?

Before Mary Magdalene, both Mary the Mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth proclaim the embodied Christ before any man. Mary, like her Son, cries out for the freedom from oppression that God beseeches humanity toward:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
For he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden,
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;
For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,
He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree;
He has filled the hungry with good things,
And the rich he has sent empty away.
He has helped his servant Israel,
In remembrance of his mercy as he spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham and to his posterity forever. (Luke 1:46-55)

Right here in this Gospel, a woman speaks of the holiness of her God, of the Spirit’s call to all, especially the poor, the meek, and the lowly. In describing God, she describes where the Church is called to be also, in service, inclusion, justice, peace and love. Mary has answered a call to

“We, as women in the Church, are offered only six sacraments, and if we deny our call to serve as priests in sacramental ministry we consent to our own oppression.”

embody Christ. She becomes priest and prophet before all others. And yet, no one would argue that just because a woman proclaimed Christ first, that men should not be allowed to be priests as well, if God were to whisper their name.

The early apostles multiply their number, choosing both men and women. Most notably, Paul recognizes the apostolic call of women, and rather than hinder them, he encourages them. In Romans he states, “I commend you to our sister Phoebe a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae” (16:1). Prisca, Phoebe, Junia, Lydia, Euodia, Syntiche, these are only a few of the female leaders of the early Church who do their work recognized by their community and their fellow apostle, Paul.

But this is only the beginning of the history of women’s ordination. For eleven hundred years history records the ordination of women. According to historian Gary Macy:

“This is a history that has been deliberately forgotten, intentionally marginalized, and, not infrequently, creatively explained away. (2008, 4).

Archaeology and history offer their evidence: a mummified Egyptian woman from 350 AD, bearing the title ‘Presbyter’; a burial site for a female presbyter named Epikto on the Greek island of Thera; the sarcophagus of ‘Leta Presbitera’ from the fifth century; a fourth century tomb mosaic identifying “Giulia Runa, woman priest”; frescos in catacombs depicting women in priestly and

“When your most sublime ideas meet the greatest resistance, remember that today’s heresy is tomorrow’s social dogma …So it was when Galileo questioned the nature of the universe. So it was when Luther asked for the publication of the scriptures in the vernacular. So it was when Sojourner Truth demanded an end to slavery, so it was when Elizabeth Cady Stanton went on a hunger strike for a woman’s right to vote, so it was when John Courtney Murray argued for freedom of conscience.”

Joan Chittister, quoted in Good Catholic Girls, p.11.

If I were a priest, O Jesus, with what love would I give you to people!

St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who in 1887 appealed to Pope Leo XIII to be ordained a priest.
Episcopal garb; and the list goes on. Then there are the letters, the books, and all the written documentation referring to women priests, their rites, their problems.

Only after the rise of the power of the papacy in the eleventh century does the ordination of women fade into the suppressed pages of history, wilfully forgotten to the loss of women, Church and God.

Scripture tells us God calls women to apostleship and ordination. History tells us the same. And so do our hearts and souls if only we have the courage to listen. How dare we then say no to women? How dare we say no to God? And yet, with their eyes covered against the light, and their ears protected against the voice of God, the Vatican does exactly that, over and over again.

“Our picture of earlier periods is shaped by what survives, and what survives has been carefully selected and preserved to reflect and support the views of those doing the selecting and preservation. It was not in the interests of those males who produced the vast canonical and theological collections of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to “remember” either that women had ever been ordained or that they ever performed liturgical functions reserved for males.”

Crime and Punishment: A Little Recent History

On July 15th, 2010 the Catholic Church reached a new low in its entrenched discrimination against women. In a twist so palpably naïve, so tangibly disordered, so blatantly sinful you couldn't make it up, the Church declared the ordination of women amongst the worst crimes of the Church. The attempted ordination of women was given the label delicta graviora. No crime could surpass this. Lest there be anyone left who doubted it, the issue of the ordination of women had clearly passed from the arena of theological discontent to the arena of spiritual martyrdom.

To make matters worse, the Vatican gave the same label on the same day to the crime of sexual abuse by priests against minors. Adding insult to injury, Church officials made it clear that in their view the thought of women fulfilling their calling to the priesthood was as reprehensible as the sexual abuse of a child.

The move left even moderate Catholics, who had perhaps given the issue of female ordination little thought to this point, horrified and stunned. In what twisted world could the empowerment of women be equated with the abuse of children? How could these statements appear together? Contrary to what it may have desired, the Vatican unleashed upon itself a well-deserved onslaught of criticism.

Forty-five years earlier, as the Second Vatican Council came to a close ushering in a new era of openness and faith, such an outcome would have been unexpected. In the late 60s and early 70s, it seemed just a matter of time until the Church would realize that they were wrong to stand in the way of God's call to ordination on the basis of gender. Since the era of Vatican II more and more women had been recognizing God's call to Holy Orders, even though they could not respond with the Church's blessing.

History is unlikely to judge kindly the Catholic hierarchy’s unrelenting condemnation of women who long to be priests in a Church that is literally crying for ministers, whose very future hangs in the balance.

Angela Bonavoglia, Good Catholic Girls, p. 269.
The Church itself recognized the call to the priesthood of at least one woman. In 1970 Ludmila Javorova of Czechoslovakia and several other women accepted ordination in secret ceremonies, as the government cracked down on the Catholic Church and its voice for justice and peace in those turbulent times. Imprisoned and exiled male priests could no longer minister to the people, so the Church opened itself to the necessity of a perfectly disguised priest: a woman.

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops responded to the sign of the times too, and in 1976 placed a unanimous appeal, under Cardinal Flahiff, for a Vatican investigation into the topic. It seemed that the windows would indeed be opened, that justice would be found. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, a standing committee of twenty biblical scholars, was directed to explore the issue. They found no biblical obstacles to women’s ordination by a vote of 12-5 (1 abstention, 2 absentees).

But silence is hard to break. Tradition bars the windows and blocks the doors, and only the most courageous find their way to the light. The report was never officially publicized. Its findings were only revealed after the chairperson of the committee, David Stanley SJ, resigned in disgust, and the document was “leaked” to the outside world.

Instead of celebrating the new possibilities promised by the report, the Vatican buried its own commission’s finding. Lest there remain any doubt to their position, the declaration Inter Insigniores was issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the former Office of the Inquisition). It re-asserted the Church’s ‘constant tradition’ that women could not be priests, taking into no account the truth that for the early centuries of the Church women had in fact, been ordained. And as peace resumed again in the Czech republic, Ludmila Javorova received instructions to step away from her ministry. She accepted.

The way I see it, our arduous task as Roman Catholic Womenpriests is to work to bring the spiritual power generated by the margins of the Church to bear on the center… We womenpriests, as worker priests, can perhaps listen and learn at the margins, and gather the Spirit’s wisdom in order to birth a new kind of priesthood that remains dependent on the margins and refuses to go into lock-down mode, squeezing out the Spirit of God.

Womanpriest Andrea Johnson, Women Find a Way, p.66.
with a relentless creaking, the window of hope was closing again at the Vatican.

The century of Catholic Social teaching drew to a close in the waning light of the twentieth century. In the heyday of John Paul II, the issue of women’s ordination became more and more anathema. Just as Catholic Social Teaching and its quest for justice became less and less of a priority, as form came to once again matter more than substance in the Catholic Church, as clericalism grew as a backlash to Vatican II, women were pushed further and further from the pulpit.

In 1994, Pope John Paul II wrote *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* in an attempt to silence women once and for all. The then head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger – later Pope Benedict XVI – declared that JP II was speaking infallibly on this matter. No Catholic should bring it up again.

No match for the Spirit, the attempt to close the issue failed. Even though the Vatican worked hard to prevent the promotion to Bishop of any man who might entertain the idea of female priests, the simple fact remained that God continued to call women. And women and men continued to answer.

In 2001 in Dublin, the first Women’s Ordination Worldwide (WOW) conference gathered together Catholics and their supporters from around the world. Under threat of excommunication, Sister Joan Chittister, O.S.B., and Sister Myra Poole, C.N.D. delivered thoughtful sound addresses. The faithful were finding a voice.

A courageous group of women, called to the priesthood, finally answered God’s call definitively in 2002. Recognizing the apostolic call to community, they opened their eyes, reached out and found each other. Gathering from across the world, seven women finally...


If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

(1Corinthians 13:1-2)
accepted Holy Orders at the hands of a legitimate Catholic bishop in a ceremony on the Danube River.

Pia Brunner, Dagmar Celeste, Gisela Forster, Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger, Iris Muller, Ida Raming, and Adelinde Theresia Roitinger opened themselves to the wrath of the Vatican even as they opened themselves to the call of their God. Excommunicated by the Church, and ridiculed by many of the faithful, these seven women lifted high their cross and stepped into the world for all to see. So ended the era of a world without recognized women priests.

Dozens of women across the world followed in the footsteps of the Danube Seven. More ordinations were held on the St Lawrence River after a second WOW conference in 2005 in Ottawa.

Coming from all walks of life and different ethnic backgrounds, ordained women testify to a call from God that cannot be denied, that cannot be refused. The organization Roman Catholic Women Priests continues to grow, supported by thousands of Catholics who recognize the sin of a Church that denies the will of God.

The Vatican fought back against the ordinations. In May 2008, the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith declared that women priests and the bishops who ordain them would be excommunicated latae sententiae. Latae sententiae excommunications are those that are automatic, thus releasing the Vatican from having to send out a declaration of excommunication to each newly-ordained woman and her supporters. Such declarations had opened the Vatican to unwanted and increasingly unfavourable media attention, and so in their minds, were best avoided.

And the Vatican reached beyond the women themselves, and began an attack on anyone who supported women’s ordination. In 2008, Maryknoll Priest Roy Bourgeois, a world renowned peace activist and Nobel Peace Prize nominee, received his own letter of excommunication for preaching at the ordination of a woman priest, Janice Sevre-Duszynska. He refused to recant his belief in the justice and validity of women’s call to the priestly vocation.

“The Spirit is no discriminator among persons on the basis of gender but can empower whomever it will. Ministry is proven by its gifts, not by its credentials.”

Rosemary Radford Ruether; Sexism and God Talk. p.197.
Other priests and a multitude of lay people cried out for justice, for an end to discrimination and the persecution of excommunication. Married men also began to answer God's call to ordination. Like the early apostolic movement itself, the Church, the real church of those who reach for God without restriction, continued to grow.

Finally, the Vatican used its latest weapon, the *Delicta Graviora* declaration. No Catholic in good standing with the Church may now debate the ordination of women. No Catholic may argue for it. No Catholic woman may ask for it. Not without incurring grave penalties from the Church.

Yet the declaration has achieved little other than spurring on those who support women's ordination to claim it more loudly and more insistently than ever. The Church is not God. The Vatican has forgotten its place. Like the disciples who would shoo the children away from Jesus, the Vatican has forgotten that their role is to facilitate the approach to God not stand in its way. The Church was always meant to be about understanding and growth of faith. The Church was always meant to be about love and spiritual empowerment.

*Delicta Graviora* arose as a misguided attempt to impede what John XXIII might call the inexorable sign of the times. Jesus is calling women. Jesus has always called women to the priesthood. This is the truth. Blinded by their wilful ignorance, and drowning in their fears, the Church fights back with their *Delicta Graviora*. But it changes nothing. The *sensus fidelium*, the Holy Spirit operating in the people, draws us toward truth. God is calling, and women are saying yes.

A declaration like *Delicta Graviora* may indeed cause some to hesitate, as did the martyr's arena, as did the cross, but if we read our history right, if we pay attention to the signs of the times, if we listen to the *sensus fidelium*, if we act out of love, if we seek the word of God, we will find the Truth, and not just for celibate men but for all.

---

The true virtue of human beings is fitness to live together as equals; claiming nothing for themselves but what they as freely concede to everyone else; regarding command of any kind as an exceptional necessity, and in all cases a temporary one.

Conscience

Deep within his conscience man (sic) discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment... For man (sic) has in his heart a law inscribed by God... His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths. (CCC #1776 – Quoted from Gaudium et Spes, 16).

Do Catholics have a right to dissent? Are we still Catholic if we disagree with the Pope? What are we to do if we feel our informed conscience compels us to oppose Church teaching?

This is hardly a new question. And the answer is straightforward. Not only do we have a right to follow our conscience, we have a responsibility. No other route exists for those who would follow the God who carried the cross.

Catholic teaching remains unambiguous on this point. In all circumstances, without exception, we are called to follow our informed conscience, despite any opposition, despite the cost. To quote eminent Catholic theologian Richard P. McBrien:

“If, after appropriate study, reflection, and prayer, a person is convinced that his or her conscience is correct, in spite of a conflict with the moral teachings of the Church, the person not only may but must follow the dictates of conscience rather than the teachings of the Church. (Catholicism, 1980: 1004).”

Like the abolition of slavery, the civil rights movement, and the right of women to vote, the ordination of women is inevitable because it is just. Let us be on the right side of history.

How then, does the Church presume to excommunicate those who would support women’s ordination? Tradition cannot stand as a barrier to the informed conscience of a humanity that reaches for its God.

*The teachings themselves are historically conditioned. What may have been perceived as morally wrong in one set of circumstances – e.g. charging interest on a loan in the Middle Ages – would be regarded as morally justifiable in another situation—e.g., charging interest on a loan today, in the context of modern commercial life.*  
(Catholicism, 1004)

The issue of women’s ordination is of far greater impact than the question of loan terms. Like slavery, the marginalization of women has always been wrong, and the Church has moved slowly to recognize it. In an 1866 ‘Instructio’, the Holy Office under Pope Pius IX felt morally correct in asserting that:

*Slavery itself, considered as such in its essential nature, is not at all contrary to the natural and divine law, and there can be several just titles of slavery, and these are referred to by approved theologians and commentators of the sacred canons… It is not contrary to the natural and divine law for a slave to be sold, bought, exchanged or given.*  
(June 20th, 1866)

With respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, colour, social condition, language, or religion, is to be overcome as contrary to God’s intent. For in truth it must still be regretted that fundamental personal rights are not yet being universally honoured. Such is the case of a woman who is denied the right and freedom to choose a husband, to embrace a state of life, or to acquire an education or cultural benefits equal to those recognized for men.

Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes), 29.

Fortunately, by 1888 Pope Leo XIII had the courage to reform Church teaching on slavery. The final frontier of exclusion and oppression in the Church now lies across gender and sexual lines, where in every culture and nation, men and women have struggled to understand, accept and value their differences.
Understandings of God have alternately supported or opposed domination. Ultimately whether we realize it or not, we each take a stand for or against the belief that God loves all people, that all of us are created good, that differences are to be cherished, that love binds us together, that no one may stand in the way of another’s call from God.

The Church’s denial of female ordination cries out against conscience. It forces Catholics to deafen themselves to the ‘voice ever calling them to do good and avoid evil.’ It obliges them to turn away from the wisdom of the ages and the pounding of the heart, and drown themselves in empty rules and vapid regulations that uphold an oppressive status quo. It tortures the soul and binds the Spirit. Ignorance of conscience is nothing less than ignorance of God.

When Rev. Roy Bourgeois received his notice of excommunication for supporting the ordination of a woman, he turned to conscience to explain himself:

Conscience is very sacred. Conscience gives us a sense of right and wrong and urges us to do the right thing. Conscience is what compelled Franz Jagerstatter, a humble Austrian farmer, husband and father of four young children, to refuse to join Hitler’s army, which led to his execution. Conscience is what compelled Rosa Parks to say she could no longer sit in the back of the bus. Conscience is what compels women in our Church to say they cannot be silent and deny their call from God to the priesthood. Conscience is what compelled my dear mother and father, now 95, to always strive to do the right things as faithful Catholics raising four children. And after much prayer, reflection and discernment, it is my conscience that compels me to do the right thing. I cannot recant my belief and public statements that support the ordination of women in our Church. (Available at www.womensordination.org)
Catholics who believe that the ban on the ordination of women is wrong must speak out against it. Catholics who even just suspect that it may be wrong must speak. We are called to dialogue, to conversation, to hearing, to sight and to speech. Only then can consciences be formed. Only then can we find our way to truth.

To remain silent is to deny conscience and harm the soul. To remain silent is to let down the Church. To remain silent is to let the cock crow while God stands trial at the mercy of humanity.
Excommunication

Silence is the voice of complicity.

Priest Roy Bourgeois, M.M.,
To My Fellow Priests.

www.womensordination.org

Excommunication is a complicated thing. Technically, any Catholic who publicly disagrees with the Church on any teaching, or acts contrary to Church teaching (think birth control) is a heretic and is thus de facto excommunicated *latae sententiae*. Which begs the question: What if you don't believe in excommunication? What if you believe that cutting a Catholic off from the sacraments is the last thing Jesus would ever have wanted? Because either the Eucharist is Christ and should be shared with even the most menial sinner, or the Eucharist is not Christ in which case we are free to deny it to others, but it hardly matters anyway.

Excommunication reeks of control. Through excommunication, the Church proclaims that it ‘owns’ Christ. To cut a Catholic off from the sacraments is essentially to try to cut them off from the Divine, a ludicrous but painful attempt at controlling both humanity and God. But here is the nexus of the issue – the denial of women’s ordination in itself is a denial of empowerment, a denial of Christ to anyone who does not look right, does not sound right, does not speak right anyway. Excommunication reflects the very problem itself.

The Church’s desire to excommunicate reflects a desire to control and silence once and for all any conversation on women’s ordination. But the Christ who conversed with fisherman, governor, woman, man, soldier, Roman, Jew, Syrophoenician, tax-collector, priest, and anyone else who approached, rejects the injustice of silence.

The truth remains that Christ is for the world, the whole world in all its complexity, difference and ambiguity. No one may cut another person off from God. No one should accept that another person be cut off from God, were such a thing even possible. As Paul said, “Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.” (Romans 2:1).
And since excommunication is based on public statements, or acts, the issue arises about consistency in its application. How is it that Cardinal Bernard Law, formerly of Boston, has not been excommunicated for protecting pedophile priests at the expense of Catholic children? Rather than excommunication he enjoys a well-paid position in Rome, close to the centre of power. His elevation remains a slap in the face to every victim, every family member and every innocent priest, searching for integrity in the Magisterium.

A further conundrum exists. *Latae sententiae* or automatic excommunication only comes into play if the ‘heretic’ has actually applied their conscience, and after much reflection decided the Church is wrong. Therefore it only applies to those who really care enough to think about the issues. In other words thoughtless yes-men are well protected.

Excommunication scourges the soul of the believer, (not because, as the Church would have us believe, it cuts a person off from God – such a thing simply is not possible) but because it signals a public shaming, a repudiation, an exclusion. And yet how appropriate for those who stand in the margins with Christ. To be excommunicated for following the cross, to be excommunicated for trying in some small way to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, to wear the modern sack cloth and ashes of excommunication, is to reach for holiness, goodness, truth, and love.

“We call justice this face-to-face approach, in conversation. If truth arises in the absolute experience in which being gleams with its own light, then truth is produced only in veritable conversation or in justice.


“For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

(Romans 8:38-39)
Like Galileo, trying to speak truth to the Church, like Venerable Mary Ward in her establishment of the Loretto sisters, like the recently canonized Saint Mary MacKillop, history may yet redeem those who risk the mantle of excommunication for the sake of integrity. And God certainly will.

Excommunication in the end, is like a gnostic illusion; the truth remains that, just as the Vatican cannot control who God calls to the priesthood, neither can it control God’s presence within humanity.

No barriers, no restrictions, no obstacles can withstand the love and power of God.
Men, Women, the Church and God

The Church forgets that ours is not a God that binds, ours is a God that frees. Such is the theology of the Roman Catholic Church if only it would listen to itself, if only it would listen to the word of God.

For the Church itself suffers by its disempowerment of women. While Catholics are required by their Sunday obligation to the mass to listen every week to the thoughts of celibate men, no Catholic is ever required to listen regularly to the reflections of women and married people on God. The experiences of women are rendered secondary, optional, unnecessary. All ‘required’ understanding of God arrives to the listener filtered by the experience of the celibate male.

Until we realize that we belong to a common humanity, that we need each other, that we can help each other, we will continue to hide behind feelings of elitism and superiority and behind the walls of prejudice, judgement, and disdain that those feelings engender.

Jean Vanier, Becoming Human, p. 82.

We suffer from this exclusion. We all suffer from it. The silencing of women in the Church legitimizes the silencing and oppression of women everywhere. Not so subtly it reinforces the notion that men must control women, that their opinions are not valued, that women cannot be trusted and must be pushed to the back of the bus by the male God who treasures above all those made in his own gender.

This is true even when these men themselves have abused women. For the abuse of women and children by priests, and the subsequent cover-ups of these abuses, is not a separate issue from women’s ordination. The culture of silence of the Church, legitimizing the second place status of women, children and even the laity, has permitted abuses that have ruptured the hearts of the people of God. Womanpriest Marie Bouclin puts it well:

Women who have suffered violence at the hands of a priest know full well that as long as there are no women standing “in loco Christi” at the altar, all women are at risk of being raped and exploited and harassed with impunity. They know in their flesh
and bones that in the current patriarchal mindset women are expendable, still “less than” men, in spite of all claims in Scripture – and even Magisterial teaching – that women and men are created equal. (Women Find a Way, 52).

Men suffer from this, brought up within a Church deprived of the voices of wisdom of the women of their community. Mary, exalted for her virginity, remains gagged in her statue in the corner, unable to speak the full magnificence of the justice she calls for to the men of the Catholic Church. And women are left looking at her impossible standard, a woman revered for being simultaneously married, a mother and yet sexless. But this is a denial of Mary’s true worth, her message lost to all but the most discerning believer.

More profoundly, since Christ and God are one with the Spirit in the trinity, then either women are created in the image of all three, or women are fundamentally flawed, cut off from some portion of God that only men can fathom and experience. The representation of Christ to women through the male priest must then also fail, because to women this understanding of God is apparently unattainable, far beyond what their biology allows. But the Church asserts that in fact both male and female are created in the image of God, and that women are open to the presence of God as much as men. Where does this leave us?

In 2009, 24% of single women lived in poverty in the US, compared to 20% of single men. Among single parent households, 29.9% of single mothers lived in poverty with their children, compared to 16.9% of single fathers with their children.


In 2008, women accounted for 83% of spousal abuse victims in Canada.

The only solution to this conundrum is to discard it, and accept that the priesthood must manifest the diversity of all humanity if it is to have any hope of representing the diversity and infinite nature of the Divine.

God is big. All of us created in God’s image – whether celibate, married, male, female – are created good. In the words again of womanpriest Marie Bouclin, “The wounded women of the Roman Catholic Church need ministers who will come to them in persona Christi, with the love and compassion of Christ.” (Women Find a Way, 52). So do the wounded men. So do the children. So do all of us.

The Church must choose; either we are a divided community, kept separate by gender, or we are one Church, each of us prized for our uniqueness, for our particular understanding of the Divine, a Church in which people of both genders are required to listen for and answer the call of God.
Mythical Language

In seeking to withhold ordination from women, the Vatican must contort its understanding of gender. The term ‘male-female complementarity’ is used to justify the different roles assigned to each gender. Men and women are simply different, the Church claims, and called to separate vocations. But complementarity presumes an equality that simply does not exist at the present time within the hierarchy.

Where is the female complement to the male priest? Where is the female complement to the male Pope? Where are the female preachers at the Sunday Mass? The deacons? The Bishops? What decisions for the global Church lie in the hands of women?

‘Complementarity’ in Church teaching, is a word like apartheid, used to justify the oppression of one group by another. It reduces the diversity of humanity to two traits, male and female, and stands in contrast to the wider inclusiveness and solidarity testified to by Jesus.

The Vatican notion of ‘complementarity’ put into practice, implies that women are beneath men, not equal, that they are lesser, redeemed only through listening to men and receiving the sacraments through them.

True complementarity, the completing of one person by another, does not exist within the Church, whatever the Vatican may say. If it did, the Church would proclaim the stories of women, their thoughts, their experiences. If it did, women would preach from the pulpit. If it did, women would be part of every committee, and every position within the Church. If it did, women too would administer the sacraments.

In 2008, women accounted for 83% of spousal abuse victims in Canada.

Statistics Canada, Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile.

www.statscan.gc.ca
Instead the Vatican seeks to mute the voices and control the sexuality of women, confining them to the pew and rendering them sexless and silent like the statues of the Virgin that adorn so many churches.

Complementarity, as used today by the Church, is no more than a word, a ruse, that hides the subjugation of women in the church. Complementarity in the Church, is a myth.
The Risk of Blasphemy

The ban on the ordination of women is without question an abuse of women. This argument however is unlikely to find purchase within the walls of the Vatican, as insulated and protected as they are from the thought world of women and married men.

But the distortion of theology necessary to exclude women from the pulpit requires an equally disturbing distortion of the theology of God’s power. The Vatican denies God’s prerogative to call whom God wills, when it denies the possibility of female ordination.

Is God unable to call women? Is God truly so limited in the eyes of the Church?

Jesus, by his very being, his life, his presence, upholds goodness, compassion and love. He does not come to set up a new set of rules or laws. He comes to free us from the whole mindset that would put rules before God, and legalism before rationality and faith. The laws of physics tell us that we cannot walk on water, but Peter walks the waves anyway. The laws of medicine tell us that once dead we cannot breathe again, yet Lazarus (not to mention Jesus) emerges from the tomb. The laws of the Church tell us women cannot be priests, but God calls them just the same.

In overstepping themselves, the Church risks blasphemy. By what right does the Church say it is ‘impossible’ for God to call women to the priesthood? By what right does the Church deny God female priests? By what right does the Church foolishly attempt to withhold Christ through excommunication?

To claim such a right is to fail not only the Church, but the very God the Vatican argues it is serving.

And [Jesus] awoke and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?”

(John 14:12)
Jesus asserts God’s call to freedom, inclusion, liberty, and hope. He stretches forth his hand to rid us of our blindness. And yet Church leaders turn away, hold to their bonds, and squeeze their eyes shut to the light. For what might we see if women were Priests? What might we hear? What might we learn?
Women at the Well

“...The silencing of women has not been very subtle, but it has been very effective.”

Poole and McEwan, *Making All Things New*, p. 56.

Could the silence of women be what Jesus wanted? Hardly. In the Gospel of John, Jesus approaches a Samaritan woman for water, and both she and his disciples ‘marvel’ that he would talk to a woman. (Apparently such marveling continues to this day.) After their encounter, the nameless Samaritan woman returns to her community and tells them about this Messiah who drank her water.

Empowered by her experience of Christ, renewed by his forgiveness of her sins, and bursting with the love of God, the Samaritan woman, this outcast sinner, responds with enthusiasm and courage. She speaks, she explains, she rejoices, and others – male and female – come to know God better as a result. We are told, “Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony” (4:39a). The people of her city do not ask her to speak; she does not wait for their permission. Her call comes directly from Jesus, one that she cannot ignore or deny.

Jesus does not silence the Samaritan woman. He does not tell her that because she is female she is physically incapable of talking about God to the people of her city. He does not withhold his life-giving water from her because of her gender. He does not say to her that the water of hope she carries must be transported by men, distributed by their sacred male hands. He does not send her to confess to one of his apostles or ask for their permission. He sends her forth as she is, created good in the image of God. Even the disciples, who cannot deny what they have seen despite their initial surprise, eventually accept her preaching authority.

To become fully human is not a question of following what everyone else does, of conforming to social norms, or of being admired and honoured in a hierarchical society; it is to become free to be more fully oneself, to follow one’s deepest conscience, to seek truth and to love people as they are.

Ultimately this is the vocation of the priest, to bring people to God, to help them to grow their understanding of faith, to lead them on a path toward speaking with God and about God themselves.

This story continues to this day. The Vatican re-enacts over and over again the shock and surprise of Jesus’ disciples, who simply cannot believe despite the evidence before them, despite the gospel itself, despite the power of the Holy Spirit, that Jesus calls women to be his priests.

And so, like the Samaritan woman who begins her story as an outcast, women priests labour at the margins of the dominating Church but at the heart of the real Church. This is where the Jesus of the Gospels is found as well, outside tradition, breaking the rules, working where the Spirit is alive, unfettered by rules and regulations that choke and gag the voice of God. Jesus speaks to women. He speaks to children. He speaks to the sick, the sinful and the ostracized. This is always where Christ is to be found in word and in deed.

The story of women priests is not yet finished. They are returning to their villages, they are speaking the word of God, they are carrying life giving water, sent forth like the Samaritan woman to be people of the Gospel, and priests of Word and Spirit. And the People of God are turning to their women priests, ears open, eyes wide, ready to drink of the water they bring and seek the water for themselves.

We are worker priests. We are financially independent from the Church and we each earn our livelihood in some other way. The financial dependence of priest upon their bishop or their order is a very strong aspect of the power structure in the hierarchical church.

In their book *Women Find a Way: The Movement and Stories of Roman Catholic Women Priests*, Elsie Hainz McGrath, Bridget Mary Meehan, and Ida Raming gather together the varied stories of twenty-six female priests and bishops. In their introduction they make their motives clear:

> We are loyal members of the church who stand in the prophetic tradition of holy obedience to the Spirit’s call to change an unjust law that discriminates against women. We are obeying well-formed and well-informed consciences. We want no “winners and losers.” We want no “fight.” We want balance, a more holistic image of God, renewal. We want unity in a community of equals where all are welcome at the table. We want no more – and no less – than our brother Jesus wanted two thousand years ago. (Women Find a Way: 2008,2)

The stories of women priests are full of courage and hope. But suffering lies behind their tales as well. For many of them, becoming a priest has meant renouncing an established place within their community or Church. They answered their calls after serious discernment, centred in prayer and faith, but they sacrificed much to do so.

Several had no choice but to leave jobs within the formal structure of the Church. The backlash extended to other areas as well. For instance, Bishop Bridget Mary Meehan, a prolific and well-loved writer on faith and prayer whose works have been translated from English into five languages, suddenly found all of her books dropped by her publisher.

The women who chose to follow their call to ordination became ‘tainted’ to those who were more concerned about propriety than faith. The effects were sometimes formal, as in the case of Meehan, and sometimes personal as in the loss of relationship. Like Joan of Arc, suddenly all they touched turned to heresy. And heresy burns.

---

When we ally ourselves with the excluded in society, not only are we enabled to see people as people and to join them in their struggle for justice, to work for community and places of belonging, but we also develop the critical tools for seeing what is wrong in our own society.

Willingly the women priests each risked entering the fire, only to find on the other side that their new life burgeons with hope and passion. They have been embraced by new communities, new sisters and new brothers, who welcome them like Lazarus.

Women priests are neither sinful nor foolish, nor power hungry, nor deluded – all labels the Vatican’s response suggests. Unlike the male bishops of the Church, they labour often with scant income, little security, but much hope. They work in community with the poor and the marginalized, without a staff, without rich vestments, without expensive buildings.

Women priests gather to worship in house churches and in community halls. Some even meet in Churches. They feed the hungry. They care for the sick. They act like apostles, not potentates. And they follow meaningfully and without apology in the footsteps of Christ.
The Woman with the Haemorrhage 

The woman moves forward, the crowd squeezing to make way for her, not out of respect, not out of love, but out of fear of contamination. For twelve years she has bled, a sign of sin, a symbol of God’s punishment.

She approaches Jesus from behind; his friends haven’t noticed her. She’s just a woman after all, and no longer young. And slowly, trembling but sure, ready for this moment to which she has been called, she touches his garment. Immediately, without fanfare, without delay, she is made whole again.

Jesus turns, asks, “Who has touched me?”

There can only be truth in a moment like this. And although his friends try to interrupt, to convince him that a light touch of the cloth is nothing, unimportant, just a woman, she faces her God, and answers him. He has called her after all.

And he speaks to her, as he speaks to all people, men or women, who have the faith to answer God’s call, to accept God’s calling to wholeness: “My daughter, your faith has restored you to health. Go in peace.”

This is God’s call to us. To stand before the Divine. To bring each other to God. To enable faith. To reach out in hope. To claim our place. To become whole again, as one Church of men and women, all beloved, all made in the image of God.
Conclusion: Renewing the Church

What difference will it make if women become priests but the hierarchy and the Vatican remain the same, only to oppress another group, only to silence other voices?

No difference of course. The mere presence of women at the pulpit and the altar would change nothing. But the breaking down of barriers, the opening of hearts, the engagement in conversation required to make this happen would necessarily and irrevocably revitalize and transform our Church.

We will be renewed. The Church, in accepting God’s call to women priests, will bring forth a process and ways of thinking as important as the end result itself.

Ordination can no longer be about power. The best priests have always known this. It can no longer be about the imposition of one voice over another. Women who already minister in a lay capacity within the Church might hold concerns that their ministry may become even more devalued if ordained women are placed above them along with ordained men. But this will not be the case.

The movement for women priests stands in opposition to any kind of oppression or hierarchical clericalism. Speaking for RCWP, Bishop Bridget Mary Meehan states:

Roman Catholic Womenpriests are an initiative, a movement within the church of a renewed priestly ministry in a community of equals. The people in our inclusive grassroots communities are gifted and empowered as partners and equals in living the Gospel in the 21st century. We are servant priests offering a more open, “discipleship of equals” model, united with the people with whom we serve.

“I do not wish for them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves.”

Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792).
Allowing the voices of women to speak from the pulpit, allowing the experiences of the feminine and the married to enter the equation, allowing the diversity of humanity to labour together in community within the ordained priesthood, can only occur within a Church that values such diversity, experiences and voices.

This is why advocating for the ordination of women is so important. This is why dialogue matters so much. The conversation transforms, in and of itself.

And this one thing we can do. We can open our eyes. We can open our ears. We can ordain women and married people in the Catholic Church, as we did in the past, as Jesus calls us to do.

We strive as Roman Catholics to be people of hope, faith and love. We strive to be bringers of justice and peace. We strive to be followers of Christ, who do not fear the difficult, painful path to change. We fail of course, often. But failing is different from giving up. We have not yet achieved full justice in the world. We have not yet become fully the people of community, conversation and peace that Jesus calls us toward.

We continue, nevertheless, along that path, walking meaningfully, prayerfully, hopefully, faithfully, lovingly, and in great good company, to the kingdom set before us.

We believe that it is possible to live and build up a new model of priesthood which, in itself, will help bring about a new model of church… We do not want to perpetuate the present model of the “providing church” that enables the deplorable passive consumer attitude of its members.

Bishop Patricia Fresen, Women Find a Way, p. 31
Appendix One - Mary Magdalene: A Reflection for Women Called to the Priesthood.

Before dawn Mary strides through the garden, searching for the cave, the tomb, while the gardener stands motionless, waiting for her. The chill of Judean nights give no hint of the warmth of Judean days. Only his eyes travel, while her feet stumble on the path.

They told her not to come, those so-called friends, those disciples of his. They told her not to risk it. But she will not be denied. Not now. Not ever.

They may hide. She will not.

It takes an eternity to find the cave with a flickering candle. And the jars full of oil to anoint the dead weigh heavily in her arms. She presses on until at last a deeper dark rises before her, a cleft where there should be rock.

Someone has moved the entrance stone to the tomb. She is grateful. She leans gingerly into the hole, dreading and hoping, and light dances against rock. She steps closer, then gasps. The shadow of a crumpled linen trembles in the candlelight.

She finds the cave empty, silent, abandoned.

He is not there. There is no one, nothing, just a gaping emptiness in the rock and in her heart. How can this be?

Mary bows her head. It isn’t possible. It has been so hard; the hope shattered by his death, her own new beginning cut off, ending as he took a last struggling breath on that monstrosity of wood. She allows her tears to fall, disappearing into the darkness at her feet.

Time passes, silent, endless in the loneliness of the cave.

Jesus said to her “Mary.”
She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabboni!”
(which means teacher)

(John 20:16)
At last she places her hand on the cool stone, and feels courage flow towards her from the yawning hole behind. A vestige left from him perhaps. Or a gift from an angel.

She raises her head, strengthens her resolve. She will not allow this to be the end, nor concede this moment to defeat. Freed by his hand of seven demons, her heart will no longer be contained. She has already won this battle for her soul. But it is hard.

She thinks, breathes deeply, remembers his words: “Seek and ye shall find, ask and it shall be given to you”. She deposits the now useless jars of oil, senses the new lightness in her arms, the freedom to move, and peers into the darkness of the garden.

There was a presence hiding out there earlier, a shade hidden in the trees. The gardener. She turns and moves back along the path, pushing aside bushes, scrambling through hedges. Where is that gardener? Where is that man?

He waits while she struggles.

It never occurs to her to walk away, that the search may be futile. The seeking itself creates a strange alchemy; it builds her strength, turns sorrow to anger, transforms grief to fire. And when the fire is burning like a watch fire in the night, when it is flaming in her belly like a sacrificial pyre, he is before her, rising out of the mist, surfacing from her dreams, this gardener, this keeper of God’s creation, this caregiver of fragile earth.

She cries, she demands, “Why have they stolen him? Where have they taken him? What have you done to him?”

For a moment, there, in the greyness of rising dawn, he says nothing, savouring this instant, delaying this hoped for resolution, which for three days has kept him from infinity, held him back from the temptation of nothingness, the escape from a beloved but ungrateful humanity, an adored but uncaring world.

Now, humanity has come to him after all, he who was beaten, dead, and lost. Here stands the evidence of faith, the meaning of resurrection, the revelation of God, the hope of all tomorrows.
He calls softly the word on his heart, in his soul, to this faithful disciple: “Mary.”

And she knows. She understands. Even before the first rays of sun break across the horizon, even before the first bird launches into song, even before the first waft of heat and light hit his face, she knows. The later storytellers will relate how she prostrated before him, how she called him ‘Teacher’, how she went forth to spread his message. But for an atomic measure of time, an eternity of existence, man stood before woman, God stood before mortal, and hope bound itself to love in one enduring embrace.
Appendix Two - God’s Hand: A Reflection for Married Men (And Others) Called to the Priesthood

The struggle for ordination for married men is intertwined with the struggle for female ordination. Peter, Jesus’ friend, the first Pope, was married. Even the Vatican does not deny this, although it is rarely mentioned. And so, Peter’s story may empower all those married men who sense a call to ordination, along with their sisters:

And when Jesus entered Peter’s house, he saw his mother-in-law lying sick with a fever; he touched her hand and the fever left her, and she rose and served him.

(Matthew 8:14-15)

Jesus waits, steady on the shifting water, his feet caressed by slow lapping waves that hide the depths of darkness below. He sees the fishing vessel and looks for Peter. Under that sparkled sky, silently expectant, the Son of Man knows the miracle will happen.

Or does he? Humans are untrust- ing and untrustworthy creatures, lacking in faith, enchained by the mundane, blindly obeying the laws of physics, of society, and of religion, even though they are blessed by choice, freedom, possibility, and hope. Humans frequently, even usually, let God down.

But Peter, grasping at last the fullness of Truth, rejecting finally his fear, breathing deeply as if for the first time, grips the boat’s gunwales and steps boldly onto water. As called. As required. And stands, eyes wide, pulse smooth, in the impossibility of God’s grace.

This one moment, this one choice, this one decision, this eternal memory, lives in the hearts of believers forever, empowering all risk takers, rule-breakers and faith seekers for generations to come. For the ones who speak for change, for the ones who stand for justice, for the ones who work for peace, for the ones who won’t give up – for all of them, for himself, for God – Peter walks on water.

It doesn’t last of course. Behind him in the boat, the other disciples, the friends of Jesus, quake in fright, trembling in terror, shouting loudly that it isn’t possible, that Peter will drown, and refuse to join in and step foot out of the boat. And Peter, although he wants to believe and struggles
to make the moment last by desperately clinging to his splintering faith, begins to doubt and starts to sink.

Jesus’ hand snaps forward, quickly reaching, firmly catching, and pulls Peter back from the abyss. Gaping and still wide-eyed, believing and doubting together, all at once, Peter, the repeatedly redeemed one, the frequent failure, standing for all humanity, looks not at the water, not at the boat, not at the stars, not anywhere else, but at the hand of God that holds his own.

And the question that returns ever again, that nags and persists always and forever, to each generation, to each individual, to me, is simply, if God asked me to do the impossible, if God beckoned me to come, if God suggested that I embrace the absurd, if God required me to ignore all human wisdom, all experience, all history, all religion, all law, if God called me to walk on water, would I trust in God’s hand and give it a try?

[Jesus] said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “O man of little faith, why did you doubt?”

(Matt 14:29-31)
Acknowledgements

I hold a deep debt of gratitude and offer my sincere thanks:

• To all those who have risked penalty to speak truth on this issue, whether ordained or not. I would especially like to thank Rev. Roy Bourgeois for first suggesting that I write this booklet, and for the continued testimony to justice of his life’s work. I also thank Bishop Bridget Mary Meehan for her insights and suggestions.

• To all the lay people, nuns, brothers and priests of many different orders who have given me much hope.

• To Andrea Cameron, Mary Nilsen, Michael O’Neill and the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research for offering guidance in my writing tasks.

• To John Quinn of the *new catholic times sensus fidelium*, for giving me a forum to post my work and thoughts, and for keeping discussion alive no matter how great the challenge. Some of the passages appearing in this booklet were first published at www.newcatholictimes.com.

• To Jacqui and Mark Lysko for all their help preparing and formatting this booklet.

• To my parents Rosemary and Tom, the first priests in my life, and my brothers and sisters, for teaching me to pray, inspiring me to think, encouraging me to write, and loving me through it all.

• Above all to my beloved husband Brian and my two children Deborah and Luke, for constantly beckoning me to peace, truth, courage, faith, hope and especially love.
Bibliography, Contacts and Resources for Further Information

Some websites to visit to find out more and get involved:

- www.womensordinationworldwide.org. WOW was founded in 1996 in Austria.

- www.womensordination.org. Women’s Ordination Conference (WOC), the oldest organization working for women’s ordination.

- http://romancatholicwomenpriests.org. RCWP seeks “to spiritually prepare, ordain, and support women and men from all states of life, who are theologically qualified, who are committed to an inclusive model of Church, and who are called by the Holy Spirit and their communities to minister within the Roman Catholic Church.” (From the website).


- www.womenpriests.org. The most comprehensive internet library of resources on Catholic women’s ordination.

- www.newcatholictimes.com. new catholic times sensus fidelium is an internationally acclaimed Catholic online journal that discusses issues of justice and peace.


- www.ocw.org.au. Ordination of Catholic Women Australia


- Statistics were taken from www.statscan.gc.ca and www.census.gov.

- www.vatican.va. Papal and Church documents cited can be found here.

**Documentary Film:**

**Books and articles:**
Some key books (and there are many more – see websites) include:


Additional Works Cited:


