

**Ladies and liturgy:**  
**An analysis of the Roman Catholic Womenpriest Movement**

By:

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Abstract:

In 2002 a group of Roman Catholic women were ordained by a Catholic<sup>1</sup> bishop in the Sacrament of Holy Orders. This action was a direct violation of Catholic law and the women were excommunicated. Rather than repent or convert to another denomination the women formed a revolutionary movement called Roman Catholic Womenpriests (RCWP) dedicated to convincing the Vatican to allow for women's ordination and ending clerical privilege. This study examines the Rhetoric of this organization and the Papal response to their efforts. Three key themes are identified in the RCWP's rhetoric, appeals to tradition, a myth of return, and appeals to justice. In addition, it is argued that the use of sacramental rituals constitutes an argument that is distinct from the discursive rhetoric of the movement. Due to the fact that both the Roman Catholic Church and the RCWP are arguing from competing mythic standpoints it is concluded that it is unlikely that they will be able to resolve their conflict through discursive means.

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<sup>1</sup> All references to "Catholic" or "the Church" should be read as indicating The Roman Catholic Church unless specifically noted in the text.

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While on the title page of this dissertation, my name appears as sole author, this study would not have been possible without the continuous help and support of many others. Words seem insufficient to express my gratitude and there are many people to thank.

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## Chapter One:

### Critical Problem and Review of Literature

The question as to whether or not a woman can be ordained a priest in the Roman Catholic Church is not new. In many ways, this issue has been a part of Church debate from the earliest councils on Catholic Canon (Halter, 2004). Gary Macy (2002) observes that much of this discussion initially stemmed from the ambiguous use of “the words *ordo*, *ordinatio*, and *ordinare* [, which] had a far different meaning in the early Middle Ages than they would come to have in later centuries” (p.3). Such terms, which came to be applied exclusively to the ordained, ministerial priesthood in apostolic succession, were initially applied to numerous Church offices including those of women such as abbesses (Macy, 2002). As the Church solidified its language in the late Middle Ages, it pushed women into increasingly secondary roles and established the male-only Church hierarchy as the *only* hierarchy (Macy, 2002). As a result, the question of ordination was silenced, along with women themselves, until the upheaval of Vatican II, in conjunction with the women’s movement of the 1970s reignited the debate (Halter, 2004; Jablonski, 1988). The Church responded to this movement with a brief period of consideration followed by an unequivocal “no,” going so far as to declare the matter an “infallible” teaching (Halter, 2004; Wijngaards, 2001). Most Catholic women accepted the papal position and ceased to challenge the issue (Browne & Lukes, 1988; Dowell & Williams, 1994; Ecklund, 2003, 2005; Foss, 1984; Jablonski, 1988; Manning, 1997; Trapp, 1989). A few quietly continue to push the issue in the hope Rome will eventually change its ruling on the matter (Byrne, 1994; Ecklund, 2005; Jablonski, 1988; Manning, 1997; Perl, 2005; Wijngaards, 2001). Many others chose to leave the Catholic Church in favor of denominations that are more open to women in ministry (Ecklund, 2005; Jablonski, 1988; Manning, 1997; Perl, 2005). On the surface it would appear

that these are the only options available, yet a small group of women have chosen to reject the ruling of the Church and, operating under a little known theology called “prophetic obedience,” have chosen to ordain women and hold services in the tradition of the Catholic Church (Fresen, 2005).

On June 29, 2002, seven Catholic women were “ordained” aboard a ship on the Danube River. The Danube Seven, as they came to be known, were acting in direct violation of Catholic laws and traditions regarding the priesthood. On August 9, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a Vatican office charged with upholding the laws and doctrine of the Catholic Church, issued a writ of excommunication,<sup>2</sup> effectively removing the offending women from the Church community for the “scandal they had caused to the faithful” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2002). In violation of church doctrine and papal decree, these women have continued to act as “priests” by celebrating “Mass” and other sacramental acts that are traditionally the exclusive occupation of ordained clergy (Conway, 2006, p. 6). In addition, they have ordained other women and become outspoken proponents for changes in the Church that would allow for licit and recognized ordination of women in the Roman Catholic tradition.

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<sup>2</sup> Excommunication is “the most severe ecclesiastical penalty, which impedes the reception of the sacraments and the exercise of certain ecclesiastical acts [such as the conferring of sacraments]” (Vaticana, 1994, §1463). Literally, it means exclusion from receiving the Eucharist, which excludes an individual from full participation in the Church community. However, it is also important to note that excommunication is not synonymous with revoking a person’s citizenship, as it cannot remove the mark of baptism that permanently binds an individual to the Church. Thus, an excommunicated individual is still part of the Church community by virtue of one’s baptism but is excluded from participating in that community which is essential to guarantee salvation. Excommunication can only be lifted by a designated member of the clergy who would demand an overt demonstration of repentance in order to allow the individual back into the community.

This small group of “revolutionaries” has grown into an international movement calling themselves Roman Catholic Womenpriests (RCWP). They describe their mission as “reclaiming [their] ancient spiritual heritage, womenpriests are shaping a more inclusive, Christ-centered Church of equals in the twenty-first century” (Mission Statement, 2007). They assert that “we believe we need to reform the church structures from within, by staying outside of official church structures, we achieve nothing. We are already excluded and this would mean accepting our exclusion” (Fresen, 2005). It is further argued by the RCWP that “by ordaining women, we are re-imagining, re-structuring, reshaping the priesthood and therefore the church” (Fresen, 2005). While the short-term goal of the RCWP “is to bring about the full equality of women in the Roman Catholic Church,” the ultimate goal of the RCWP is to endorse “a new model of Priestly Ministry,” that does not elevate priests above the community of believers (Fresen, 2005). At the 2005 WOC (Women’s Ordination Conference) Patricia Fresen, an ordained womanpriest, described the long-term goals of the RCWP as a Church without a hierarchal ordained clergy. Fresen (2005) describes a vision of ordination that “gives one a different function but not more power...Leadership is important, but in a model of shared power: Schussler-Fiorenza’s well-known, ‘discipleship of equals.’” Such a vision of “leadership” suggests a radical reorganization of the Catholic Church. Despite advocating for such a drastic change, the RCWP claims the movement “does not perceive itself as a counter-current movement against the Roman Catholic Church” (Meehan, Doko, & Rue, 2004). Further, the RCWP assert that it “want[s] neither a schism nor a break from the Roman Catholic Church, but rather want[s] to work positively within the Church” (Meehan, Doko, & Rue, 2004).

By arguing for equal opportunity in all expressions of the faith tradition, the RCWP is operating in an enlightenment mode of thought in which equality is the expected norm. The



Catholic Church is operating under a conflicting set of cultural norms, many of which have not changed substantially since the early Middle Ages. In many ways, the Catholic Church has retreated into its traditional identity in order to protect itself from perceived threats from the increasingly secular world. In contrast, the RCWP wants the Church to embrace many of the advances of modern society, especially the value of equality. In addition, by performing illicit ordinations and rejecting their excommunication the RCWP is openly rejecting the hierarchy and authority of the Vatican in favor of its own interpretation of Church tradition and theology. The RCWP claim that it is not a schismatic movement, nor does it seek separation from the Catholic Church, but the group acts in contradiction to canon law and desires a complete restructuring of the Church. Thus, the RCWP is a movement caught within an interesting paradox; the movement desires to remain a part of an organization, but it wants that organization to change into something completely new, something that the Church does not wish to become.

While the RCWP have never actively sought to recruit members to the organization, it does feel called to assert the radical re-visioning of the Church in the public sphere.<sup>3</sup> The group issues press releases for each of their ordination events, which have garnered significant press coverage (Berggren, January 27, 2006; Rodgers, August 11, 2006). The traditionally conservative *National Catholic Register* published an article in May of 2007 asserting that “an ordination ceremony held May 27, 2007 by a group that calls itself “Roman Catholic Womenpriests” has no connection whatsoever to the Roman Catholic Church” (n.p.). They further downplayed the significance of the event saying, “a press conference was held after the ceremony but it garnered almost no media coverage in Toronto except for a couple of radio

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<sup>3</sup> In her 2005 address, Patricia Fresen notes that they have never had to actively recruit; those who desire ordination find them on their own. However, she also advocates for public ministry in order to spread the RCWP’s vision of the Church.

reports” (n.p.). These comments function to both separate the connection of the RCWP and the Roman Catholic Church, essentially asserting the only connection between the two groups is a similar name, and to underplay the potential significance of the group by suggesting it has received little attention (because they are not making a statement worthy of attention). Yet the reaction of the Catholic Church would suggest that these women are indeed making a statement that is worthy of attention. A year after the Toronto Ordinations on May 29, 2008 the Vatican issued a general decree:

Remaining firm on what has been established by canon 1378 of the Canon Law, both he who has attempted to confer holy orders on a woman, and the woman who has attempted to receive the said sacrament, incurs *in latae sententiae* excommunication, reserved to the Holy See.(§2)

A “general decree” is made to the entire community of believers, often disseminated through the popular press as well as the Catholic press. In addition, *in latae sententiae* excommunication is excommunication by the commission of an act, regardless of whether or not the Holy See is aware the specific act took place (McGrath, Meehan, Ramming, (eds), 2008). Such a reaction suggests that the Vatican is taking this group seriously.

The RCWP has itself responded to the Vatican’s General Decree by publishing a book, *Women Find a Way*, which provides detailed accounts of the women involved in the movement and the organization’s vision for the future of the Church. *Women Find a Way* provides a comprehensive look into this unique group that seeks to change one of the oldest enduring institutions in the world. While there is significant scholarship on the issue of women and ordination, scholars have virtually ignored this significant and growing movement.

In this analysis, I seek to explore the methods and arguments of the RCWP movement. Specifically, I explain how the RCWP manipulates the use of the ritual of ordination as the movement's principle strategy. Through a comprehensive analysis of the book *Women Find a Way*, as well as other documents from the RCWP and the competing rhetoric presented by the Vatican, I explain how ritual is used as an argumentative strategy in highly mythic contexts.

*Critical Problem:*

In many ways, the RCWP movement is not unique. It has borrowed strategies from other movements both in secular feminism and religious reform. One can compare this movement to previous movements for the ordination of women in the Catholic Church or to efforts for the full inclusion of women in the ministerial leadership of other faiths, such as the successful movement for the ordination women in the Church of England. It may also be possible to compare the RCWP to secular movements for the full inclusion of women in civil society, such as the suffrage movement. Such comparisons would certainly highlight the enduring goals and strategies of feminist efforts for equality. However, such comparison would also fail to appreciate the unique position of the RCWP as a movement within one of the most dogmatically entrenched and hierarchical organizations in the Western World, the Roman Catholic Church. The absence of a democratic governing body, such as Congress or a coalition of bishops, which may be swayed by public opinion, makes change in the Catholic Church particularly difficult. It is not sufficient for the RCWP movement to convince the people of the Church community that it is right. The RCWP must convince the powers in Rome, specifically the Pope, that the current understanding of the Church is wrong and must be changed, a particularly daunting task as the matter of ordination being restricted to males alone was declared an infallible teaching by Pope John Paul II in 1994.

This project is an in-depth study looking at how the RCWP functions and how it presents itself through its rhetoric. I argue that the RCWP is a part of the formal women's ordination movement in a period of transition, moving from its inception phase into a period of maintenance. The publication by the movement itself of a book detailing the stories of their movement can be interpreted as evidence of this shift. Such a transition provides an opportunity to examine the strategies used by the RCWP in its inception and to evaluate how it has symbolically defined themselves and their vision of a transformed Catholic Church.

In the remainder of this analysis, I analyze the RCWP's efforts to reinterpret the canonical assumptions of Rome as well as the symbolic identity they have created. In evaluating the RCWP movement, I focus on three strategies that define the movement and its rhetoric. Specifically, I examine how the RCWP uses ritual as an argumentative strategy, the manner in which they employ a myth of return, and the way in which they negotiate the precarious tension between tradition and modernity in an effort to act as an internal movement.

### RCWP Rhetoric

The rhetoric of the RCWP reveals three dominant themes that recur throughout the literature of the organization. These are appeals to tradition, appeals to a myth of return, and appeals to justice. The RCWP links both the ideals and the actions of the organization to these themes. Considering that these themes are also important to the rhetoric and identity of the Roman Catholic Church, they form a solid foundation for the rhetoric of the movement and an understanding of the debate.

The first major theme in the rhetoric of the RCWP is that of tradition. The Roman Catholic Church operates under a dual set of rules, each with its own role in the practice of the religion. First, there are rules set by the Church to ensure the smooth operation of the Church.

Such rules can change and adapt with changing times. Second are those rules that are seen as sacredly revealed, either through biblical account or through continuous traditions. Such “sacredly revealed” rules are permanent fixtures in the Church and dictate the Church’s sacramental practice (Vaticana, 1994, §116). Thus, in order to argue for change within the Roman Catholic Church it is necessary to demonstrate that the new action is in keeping with the enduring traditions of the institution. As will be demonstrated in later chapters, the RCWP repeatedly relies on interpretations of the history of the Church that support their claim that it is acceptable for women to be priests in the Roman Catholic rite.

The second dominant theme that the RCWP relies on in their rhetoric is a myth of return. Considering the fact that the RCWP movement is operating within the confines of the mythic system of the Catholic Church it should come as no surprise that the RCWP has chosen multiple strategies that can be understood through a mythic lens. However, it is interesting that a movement that purports to want to move the practices of the Catholic Church into the twenty-first century should base their vision of the Church in the context of a return to the earliest traditions and foundations of the Church. Such a strategy connects to the concept of the myth of return as described by Eliade (1963) in that the RCWP is enacting a desire to return to the primal origins of the Church community. However, this effort can also be understood as a paradoxical pairing of the concepts of revolutionary and reactionary movements suggested by Cathcart (1972, 1978, and 1980).

As a group advocating that the ideal for the Catholic Church should be a return to the community structure described in the Bible, the RCWP is arguing very much like a reactionary movement, one that believes the group has drifted too far from the right path and must return to the true way. However, as a group advocating that the Church needs to adapt to the demands of

the twenty-first century and as movement seeking to change traditions that have been solidified for more than a millennium they are behaving much like a revolutionary movement, one that seeks to change the establishment. Understanding how the RCWP negotiates these two seemingly antithetical identities is vital to understanding the RCWP movement.

The final theme that dominates the rhetoric of the RCWP is justice. Here justice is understood broadly as one of the cardinal virtues of the Roman Catholic Church. The virtue of justice guides all charitable action and respect for the dignity of others. The RCWP is an organization seeking social change and working for the betterment of individuals within the institution of the Roman Catholic Church. It is not enough for them to simply argue that the practices of the church are not fair to women. They must go further and demonstrate that the inequity in the practices of the Catholic Church contradict those values which are held by the institution.

Considering the RCWP is challenging a centuries old institution that believes its practices are divinely ordained, it is necessary that they challenge only the actions which are seen as offensive, not the source of those actions. By arguing that the inclusion of women is in keeping with the virtuous mission of the Church, and is the way it was intended and has been done in the past, the RCWP is able to make their case without offending the core identity of the Roman Catholic Church. In chapter three, I explore these themes in detail.

### Ritual as Argument

The RCWP's decision to co-opt the Catholic tradition of Holy Orders and ordain women in the practice of that tradition is one that has alienated the movement from both the mainstream

Church as well as other feminist movements in the Catholic Church.<sup>4</sup> It is also an action that is laden with symbolic meaning and therefore deserves critical attention. In this study, I look at how the RCWP uses the performance of the ordination ritual as one of their primary sites of argument.

To understand the significance of such performative actions one must accept that the ordination ceremony is a sacred ritual deeply entrenched in the mythology of the Catholic Church, and is therefore an expression and enactment of those sacred traditions. Kluckhohn (1942) explains that rituals serve not only to dramatize the mythology of a community but that there is an “intricate interdependence of myth (which is one form of ideology) with ritual” (p. 54). Thus, the myth is enacted through the ritual, but the ritual is dependent upon the story that provides direction and justification for the act. By co-opting the ritual of ordination, the RCWP is challenging the Catholic tradition of apostolic succession, on which the entire Church hierarchy is built.

The interdependence of myth and ritual highlights the significance of the RCWP’s use of ordination as a powerful argument against current Church traditions regarding Holy Orders. Additionally, such a relationship between belief and practice clarifies why the Church has taken such drastic action in their response to this small group of revolutionary women. While it may appear that the use of such a strategy would create an impasse for discussion between the RCWP and the Catholic Church, Kluckhohn (1942) makes it clear that change is possible within mythic systems and that this change often comes initially from changes in the practice of rituals.

Specifically Kluckhohn (1942) argues:

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<sup>4</sup> The General Decree of Rome is evidence of the RCWP’s separation from the mainstream Church. The reaction of other efforts for the ordination of women is discussed by Henold (2008) and Moon (2008).

Whether belief (myth) or behavior (ritual) changes first will depend, again, both upon the cultural tradition and upon external circumstances. Taking a very broad view of the matter, it does seem that behavioral patterns more frequently alter first. (p. 53)

Thus, in evaluating this strategy it is necessary to examine how the RCWP navigates between the performance of the ritual and their arguments for changes to the mythic systems that define the ritual. By examining these strategic elements of the RCWP's rhetoric, it is my hope to provide a broader understanding of religious movements and the unique barriers they face.

*Method:*

The focus of this project is a comprehensive reading of *Women Find a Way: The Movement and Stories of the Roman Catholic Womenpriests*. This primary text will be supplemented with several additional texts including press releases describing specific ordination events and literature made available by the RCWP on their website, including their vision and mission statements and resources provided to their members. The in-depth reading of these texts will focus on the rhetorical strategies used and the manner in which the RCWP engage their audience. However, an examination of these texts alone does not fully encompass the entirety of the RCWP's strategy; therefore, the actual act of ordination will also be considered as part of the RCWP argument.

In addition to a detailed examination of the rhetoric of the RCWP, significant attention will be paid to the documents put out by the Catholic Church. It is important to examine these documents as they create a sort of dialogue (albeit a hostile one) with the RCWP. Examining these documents will not only provide a context for the rhetoric of the RCWP, it will also provide a more complete understanding and explanation of the entire women's ordination debate.



In order to analyze these texts, I begin with a descriptive analysis of the texts to identify dominant characteristics. I read the available texts of the RCWP and the corresponding Vatican responses, looking at a variety of textual factors including tone, persona, language choices, argument types, and other strategies. The RCWP rhetoric is be considered separately from the Vatican rhetoric at this stage. Using the detailed description of the rhetorical texts, I next place the rhetoric in the context of the ordination debate and the values of the twenty-first century. This analysis attempts to understand the rhetoric in the context of the time. I then identify the underlying rhetorical pattern in the rhetoric of the RCWP and the Vatican response, with a focus on ritual, myth, and tradition.

In identifying the underlying rhetorical patterns, I draw on the tradition of movement criticism. Lealand Griffin argues that the primary objective of any analysis of a movement is “to *discover*, in a wide sense of the term, the rhetorical patterns inherent in the movement selected for investigation” (in Burgchart, 2004, p.371). In carrying out this effort, this study is primarily focused on creating a comprehensive description of the RCWP movement as a unique communication event within the larger movement for the ordination of women in the Catholic Church. However, the study also adds to our understanding of how ritual can be used in the arguments of myth bound movements as well as to help elucidate some of the unique characteristics of religious and ideological communication.

#### *Review of Literature:*

The literature discussing women and religion is large, even when restricted to issues faced by women in the Catholic Church.<sup>5</sup> Given this plethora of scholarship, a discussion of

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<sup>5</sup> See for example: (Bruce & Duffield, 1972; Byrne, 1994; Carmody, 1986; Dowell & Williams, 1994; Ebaugh, 1991; Ecklund, 2003, 2005, 2006; Fogarty-S.J., 1989; Foss, 1984; Gardner-S.S.N.D.,

existing literature must be restricted to a survey of the most significant texts. Discussion of the RCWP outside the popular press or works published by member of the organization is limited to a single study published in the *Journal of Feminist Studies on Religion* and a few references in books on the balance between feminism and Catholicism. These works are addressed first. Next, I discuss the literature dealing with the more general issues of women and religion. Such works can be classified into three major groups. The first look at how religious institutions have adapted to changes in society, especially issues dealing with the role of women and issues dealing with the conflicts between modernism and tradition are negotiated. The second group examines the general experience of women in religious institutions, exploring how women find an identity that balances secular feminism and religious dogma in modern society. The third looks specifically at previous movements for the ordination of women and discussion of communal reactions to the question of women's ordination.

The RCWP is an organization made up of well-educated, well-informed individuals. Many of these individuals are in the academic world and publish articles about the RCWP movement and its mission. For example, Victoria Rue (2009, 2008a), a womenpriest, has written several articles which defend the ordination practice of the organization. However, when evaluating the existing literature on the issue of women's ordination and the RCWP movement it is important to view these articles with some suspicion. While I do not challenge the scholastic integrity of these works, I do believe it is necessary to acknowledge the potential bias of the

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1975; Halter, 2004; Henold, 2008; Jablonski, 1988; Macy, 2002; Manning, 1997; Melton & Ward, 1991; Moon, 2008; Murphy-SHCJ, 1997; Nason-Clark, 1987; Nore'n, 1992; O'Connor & Drury, 1999; Perl, 2005; Raming, 2002; Rosenblatt, 1991; Trapp, 1989; Vaticana, 1994; Wallace, 1988, 1993, 2000; Wijngaards, 2001; Yeaman, 1987)

source. In this respect, the works are treated in this study as part of the rhetoric of the RCWP rather than as independent scholarship about the organization.

Helen Moon (2008) provides the only scholarly discussion of the RCWP which is not written by an author associated with the organization, in her article “Womenpriests: Radical Change or More of the Same?” published in *the Journal of Feminist Studies of Religion*. In this study, Moon evaluates the RCWP movement based on interviews conducted with nine ordained women from the movement. Moon argues that it is her intention to “analyze the movement and interpret the issues, and look at whether the womenpriest movement can truly dismantle kyriarchal church structures as it purports to do” (p. 117). While Moon provides a critical analysis of the movement, her study does not examine the rhetoric or symbolic structures of the RCWP but instead relies on the experiences and interpretations of a small number of women involved in the movement. In addition, Moon focuses the majority of her critique on “how the womenpriests have essentialized the notion of women in the movement” (p. 123). Moon’s primary focus is on the RCWP as a *feminist* movement. In this study, I focus on the RCWP as a rhetorical movement confronting deeply entrenched religious traditions that they are not willing to completely deny.

Mary J. Henold (2008) provides the only other scholarly mention of the RCWP, which she cites as an example of one of many groups transforming Catholic feminism into action. However, Henold does not evaluate this movement beyond a brief reference to their ordination ceremonies and the disquiet felt by other facets of the wider Catholic feminist movement who want “a transformed priestly ministry without the trappings of clericalism” (p. 241).

Current scholarship on the RCWP is inadequate to explain this complex and engaging social movement. However, at the heart of the conflict between the Catholic Church and the

RCWP is a clash between modern sensibilities about equality and centuries old tradition and hierarchy. This scholarship takes on this debate in effort to understand how this tenuous balance is negotiated. In confronting this large literature, I summarize representative essays to illustrate their relevance to this study.

In 1979, Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony took on this issue in their article “The sociology of contemporary religious movements” in the *Annual Review of Sociology*. Among the pertinent issues Robbins and Anthony discuss is the concept that increased spiritualism and exotic religious movements has combined with increasing secularism to create an environment in which persons could “shop” for a religious identity that fits one’s immediate needs. In addition, they note that research shows a growing “crisis of community” in which traditional communal structures are eroded by social change and conventional groups are unable to provide for the new relational needs of their members. Robbins and Anthony focus mainly on how this environment was ripe for the rise of potentially dangerous cults, but their research also shows how social change can have a profound effect on the religious environment, and force even the most enduring of traditions to adapt in order to maintain membership.

Karen Armstrong takes on a very different facet of the debate between tradition and secularization in her 2004 article “Resisting modernity: The backlash against secularism.” Armstrong examines how religious movements, specifically fundamental movements in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, have taken on a militant resistance to secularization. Armstrong (2004) notes that such movements spring from “the fear that modern society wants to purge itself of religion.” (p. 42). While Armstrong’s study does not speak directly to the issue of the RCWP or women’s ordination, it does help to highlight the issues at play in the conflict with the Church and some of the reasons why the Church so firmly holds to its traditional hierarchy.

In the essay “The narrative paradigm and rational justification of values: Religious argument in the Christian tradition,” Jeffery Dale Hobbs (1985) takes on the question of how religious convictions are able to endure in a culture that increasingly places significance on perceived rationality and proof. Much of the modern backlash against religion stems, in part, from the accusation that religion is illogical, an invective that began in the Enlightenment. Hobbs argues that for the faithful, religion is not a special belief for which logic is unnecessary, but instead has a logic of its own that stems from religious metaphors and stories. Using Fisher’s concept of the narrative paradigm, Hobbs demonstrates how audiences are able to find logic in religious paradox in order to justify their beliefs in the face of competing narratives both from within and from outside their belief tradition. Hobbs’ study helps to elucidate the question of argumentative validity in the debate between the RCWP and the Vatican, showing that both sides have a claim to the integrity of their arguments, but it does not explain the potential of such an argument to endure or overcome another over time.

The body of literature addressing the conflicts between traditional religion and modern secularism is useful in understanding the contextual environment in which the RCWP environment operates. However, this literature fails to provide a clear understanding of the RCWP or its potential for success. The next body of literature that is helpful to understand the issues involved in the RCWP movement is that literature which examines the way in which women negotiate their roles within a religious context. Again, I summarize representative texts to illustrate a connection to this essay.

In 1985, Barbara Hardgrove, Jean Miller Schmidt, and Sheila Greeve Davaney published a comprehensive survey about women in American religion, “Religion and the changing role of women.” They examine the influence of the feminist movement on American religions,

discussing how various faith traditions have adapted to the changing role of women in society. They note that while Catholic churches have modernized, with religious communities discarding the distinctive habit of the nun and encouraging greater involvement in the community for all women, the Catholic Church continues to promote a domestic role for women. Most significantly, they note that the passage of the nineteenth amendment granting suffrage rights to women resulted in women seeking greater involvement in the decision-making processes of their churches. However, they also note that this change was most apparent in American Protestant churches that use a democratic model for much of their policymaking. Hardgrove, Schmidt, and Davaney's study leads one to believe the lack of such an egalitarian model may prove a major hindrance for efforts for women's ordination in the Catholic Church, but it does not fully explain the situation in which the RCWP movement operates.

Christel J. Manning (1997) takes on the way in which changes in gender roles within the Catholic Church, particularly in America, have resulted in a divided Church in which the power and authority of Rome has become tenuous. In a 1997 essay, "Women in a divided Church: Liberal and conservative Catholic women negotiate changing gender roles," Manning exams how this divide manifests itself in the views of women on the position of women within the Church. Manning notes that there is often considerable friction between conservatives, who feel the liberal element is diluting Church doctrine, and liberals, who feel the conservative element is too rigid. However, "neither side feels alienated enough to leave" (p. 378). Manning's observations suggest that commitment to the Church community is a particularly strong force and helps to elucidate why the women of the RCWP have chosen to remain in the Church and have not split into their own denomination; however, it does not illuminate the entire situation.

Elaine Howard Ecklund has taken on several issues involving how women negotiate their identity and leadership potential within the Catholic Church. In 2003, Ecklund took on the specific issue of Catholic feminists in her article “Catholic women negotiate feminism: A research note.” Specifically, Ecklund sought to understand how women negotiate an understanding between the “*seemingly* contradictory identities” of traditional Catholic and modern feminists (p. 516). Ecklund focused her study on explaining how women who identify as feminist and choose to remain a part of the faith community navigate the incongruous aspects of these identities. She concludes that such women tend to either reinterpret feminism in light of Catholicism or Catholicism in light of feminism, with a third group choosing to compartmentalize their political ideologies as separate from their religious convictions. Understanding how women are able to find balance between such conflicting ideologies is an important first step in explaining the actions and attitudes of the RCWP, but Ecklund does not consider the RCWP.

In her 2005 article “Different identity accounts for Catholic women,” Ecklund examines how women construct their identity within the context of Church doctrine and feminist ideologies. She classifies women into three major groups: those who agree with the Church and remain committed members, those who disagree with the Church and leave it, and those who disagree with the Church but remain committed members (p. 135). This third group is most significant to understanding the members of the RCWP as the movement professes a disagreement with the Church but also continues to assert a connection to the Church community. Ecklund notes that most of these women find meaning by personally negotiating their Catholic identity and feminist ideologies. Most of the women examined in Ecklund’s study, who fell into this third category, remained committed to the Church out of a fidelity to their

community, personal meaning they garnered from the faith experiences, and most significantly for the current study, a belief that it is possible to change the institutional church from within. Ecklund's discussion of women's identity in the Church is useful in explaining why the members of the RCWP have chosen to continue to operate as members of the Catholic Church, but it does not fully explain the movement, nor does it address why they would act in direct violation of Church practices.

In 2006, Ecklund published an article addressing women's leadership roles in Catholic parishes. Specifically Ecklund examined factors that influenced attitudes toward women in leadership roles, comparing those in progressive parishes with those in traditional parishes. Ecklund found that progressive parishes saw giving leadership positions to women as "part of the overall commitment to equality of all people," while parishes that were classified as traditional tended to see women lay leadership as a "less than ideal [necessity], occurring mostly as a result of the priest shortage" (p.86). Ecklund concludes that more focus needs to be paid to the differences within local church communities. Ecklund's study helps to highlight some of the situational factors that complicate the emergence of women into leadership within the Catholic Church. However, this study does not address the possibility of women's ordination, nor does it address the significant role of the institutional Church in stipulating the rules for all parishes.

Frances O'Connor and Becky S. Drury (1999) take a particularly controversial view of the balance between feminism and Catholicism, arguing that women are complicit in their own oppression. In their book *The Female Face in Patriarchy: Oppression as Culture*, O'Connor and Drury assert that women in the Catholic Church have so internalized messages regarding their subservient position that they no longer even question the power imbalances. They observe that many women do not feel that they are worthy or capable of taking on a more proactive role in the



Church and therefore are unwilling to step forward to challenge the current system even when these same women sense that there is something wrong with the existing imbalance of power. They further argue that even when women step forward to challenge the existing power system they do so in a manner which mimics the very hierarchies which oppress them, further legitimating the system as a whole. O'Connor and Drury's take on the problems with existing movements is especially poignant as it helps to clarify several of the potential strengths and weaknesses of the RCWP movement. However, they only address the issue of women's ordination tangentially.

While the RCWP is a new movement that has yet to be adequately examined by scholars, the movement is the successor of several other movements, which have been carefully considered by scholars. This final selection of literature looks at those studies which have explored the complicated question of women and ordination.

The Catholic Church has remained steadfast in its opposition to the ordination of women, while the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, denominations which are closely related to Catholicism in belief and practice, have acquiesced to the demand for female clergy, and the success of the movements has been the subject of several scholarly studies. When one considers the significant parallels in the theology and practice of the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church as well as parallels between the movements to include women in the ministry it is apparent that a brief examination of this literature is instructive.

Sonja K. Foss's (1984) study "Women priests in the Episcopal Church: A cluster analysis of establishment rhetoric," provides a detailed examination of the strategies used by Episcopal women in their eventually successful movement for women priests. Interestingly, Foss shows how women in the Episcopal movement used a strategy of irregular ordination, similar to that

used by the RCWP. She also examines how the women of this movement were able to successfully re-conceptualize the community's understanding of the pertinent terms "church," "priest," "male," and "female" in order to make their case and to fit their argument for women's ordination into the context of the theology of the faith. Specifically, the women of the Episcopal movement highlighted inconsistencies between the manner in which the ideas of church, priest, male, and female were manifested in the doctrine of the faith and the practice of the faith. The challenge posed by these inconsistencies threatened the legitimacy of existing church hierarchy, thus making change possible, as shared power was better than lost power. While Foss demonstrates the potential for success of a women's ordination movement, it is important to note that there are significant differences between the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church and the Episcopal Church. The change that occurred in the Episcopal Church was the result of a vote by the governing body of Bishops who were susceptible to the contemporary demands of their community. Such a democratic governing system does not exist in the Catholic Church.

While there has yet to be a successful movement for the ordination of women in the Catholic Church, the RCWP is not the first movement to pursue this goal. Carol J. Jablonski (1988) explores another such movement in her essay "Rhetoric, paradox, and the movement for women's ordination in the Roman Catholic Church." Jablonski explores a movement that emerged out of the perceived potential of Vatican II called "Woman-Church," providing a comprehensive discussion of the issues involved in the movement for the ordination of women and the organization's efforts to build their membership and share their message. As "Woman-Church" is considered by the women of the RCWP to be an important predecessor to their own movement, it is important to examine Jablonski's discussion of this group. However, Jablonski predicted that if members of the women's ordination movement were ever excommunicated they

would leave the church and form their own denomination, a prediction that has not occurred in the case of the RCWP which continues to insist that they are still a part of the Catholic Church. Thus, it is necessary to look more deeply at the RCWP to determine why they have not left and why they continue to believe in their own potential for success.

The issue of women's ordination is one which has continued to develop for several decades. Daniel J. Trapp's (1989) dissertation, "The discussion of the ordination of women to the Priesthood among Roman Catholics in the United States, 1977-1987," demonstrates the complexity and enduring quality of this debate. Trapp's study provides a largely descriptive account of the ordination debate in the decade that followed the publication of a key pontifical declaration regarding the ordination of women and thus sets the stage for an analysis of the RCWP.

The review of literature provides only a brief survey of the available literature regarding the broad issues of women in the Catholic Church and efforts to include women in the sacrament of Holy Orders. While such a survey is inevitably incomplete, it does demonstrate that while there is significant literature available about the general issues involved in this study there is a significant dearth in regard to the RCWP movement. Given the relevance of the issue and the persistence of the movement, the strategies and rhetoric of the RCWP warrant further study.

*Outline of Project:*

In chapter two, I provide a brief historical and contextual background on the issues surrounding the ordination of women. The Catholic Church has a complicated set of rules and traditions that govern the manner in which sacraments, such as Holy Orders, may be conferred and it is necessary to explain these laws and practices in order to appreciate the significance of the actions and arguments of the RCWP. In addition, I will also outline how women have

traditionally fit in the hierarchy of the Church and how that role has changed over time. This short historical overview concludes with a discussion of how the changes in the roles of women led to the movement for the ordination of women. I include a history of the movement beginning with Vatican II and ending with the Papal decrees of the 1990s that essentially closed the door on the matter from perspective of the Holy See.

In chapter three, I provide a short description of the Roman Catholic Womenpriest movement. I define the general goals and ideology of the movement, focusing special attention on vision and mission of the organization by looking at the overall symbolic transformations attempted by the group through the rhetoric they have produced and the actions they have undertaken. I then identify and evaluate the three major themes of tradition, myth of return, and justice. In this chapter, I analyze the book *Women Find a Way* in detail in order to ground my discussion and analysis of the movement.

In chapter four, I analyze the rhetoric of the RCWP and address the way in which the RCWP uses ritual as a primary site of argument. First, I explore the way in which the group enacts tradition, myth of return, and justice through ritual. At the heart of their arguments is a claim that they do not wish to change the Church into something new but instead wish to return the Church to the true intentions and practices of its foundation. Finally, I discuss how ritual enacts a symbolic transformation for the arguments of the RCWP.

In the final chapter, I return to the key focus of this study, the symbolic transformations of the RCWP and the potential success of the movement.

*Conclusion:*

This study is at its core a movement study aimed at analyzing the symbolic transformations of the RCWP. Considering the reaction the group has garnered from the Catholic

Church they seek to change, it seems important to examine this group and the rhetoric they have created, something current scholarship has failed to do. It is the goal of this project to produce a complete and cohesive analysis of this unique movement and to offer an explanation as to how they have presented themselves and what they have done to elicit the ire of what is arguably one of the most powerful and enduring institutions in the Western World.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **History and Context of Women in the Roman Catholic Church.**

The debate as to the proper role of women in the Roman Catholic Church is based on interpretations of “the ‘Sacred deposit’ of the faith (*depositum fidei*), contained in Sacred Scripture and Tradition” (Vaticana, 1994, §84). In other words, the authority of beliefs and practices in the Roman Catholic Church is found in the ability to connect the organization to the foundational moments of the faith through historical interpretation. Within the Roman Catholic Church, “Sacred Scripture and Tradition” are the only sources for revelation of Roman Catholic dogma and “the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome [the Pope]” (Vaticana, 1994, §85). While feminist theology scholars do not debate the concept that Scripture and Tradition are the sole sources for the revelation of divine truths, they do take issue with the concept that only the bishops and Pope may interpret such revelation and only the Pope may recognize the validity of a text as a source of revelation (Fiorenza, 1994; King, 1998; MacHaffie, 1986). At issue is the understanding of the history of women in the Roman Catholic Church, and therefore, their future role.

History may be understood as the narrative product of those stories compiled from the available rhetorical resources available in a given age. It “is best figured not as the accurate transcript of the past but as a perspectival discourse that seeks to articulate a living memory for the present and the future” (Fiorenza, 1994 p. xxii). It is further interpreted through the terministic screens of those who record it and the biases of those who read and evaluate it. As various rhetorical resources became available, the interpretations of the history of the Roman Catholic Church and its implications for the practice of the faith have changed and adapted. The conclusions reached by contemporary Roman Catholic bishops are not necessarily identical to

those reached by Medieval Catholic bishops. Feminist theologians looking at the same issue reach still other conclusions. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1994) asserts that viewing history in this manner should not be seen as advocating a relativistic perspective of “limitless pluralism but seeks to redefine scientific objectivity by calling for a paradigm shift from a positivistic to a rhetorical figuration of feminist and biblical historical studies” (p. xxii).

To understand the arguments about the role of women in the Roman Catholic Church, it is vital to examine the rhetorical resources available to the interested parties. In this chapter, I provide a brief description of the history of women in the Roman Catholic Church. I examine the historical record citing from research reflective of the best historical evidence about actual practices in a given period, official Catholic doctrine and documentation, and modern feminist interpretations

It is not my intention to provide a comprehensive accounting of the full two thousand years of Roman Catholic History, or even Catholic women. Such an undertaking is beyond the scope of the current project. Instead, I have broken the history of the Catholic Church into six specific periods: the early history of Christianity, the period of the great Church Councils and the establishment of official Church Canon, Roman Catholic life in the Middle Ages until the period of the Reformation, the tumultuous period of the Reformation, the emergence of the modern era, and finally the period following the Second Vatican Council to the present time.

*The emerging Christian Community and the Church of the first four centuries CE*

In this section, I explore the earliest foundational moments of the Christian faith. The RCWP, as well as other feminist theology movements, rely heavily on observations and interpretations of this period when making the argument that the oppression and exclusion of women by the Roman Catholic Church goes against the intentions of the original practitioners of

the Christian faith. The hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church also draws on the history of this period in their counter-arguments, which assert that the roles available to women in the Church are in keeping with the enduring traditions of the faith that began in this period.

In order to provide a more complete understanding of these important foundational moments, I first provide an historical accounting of the role of women in Christian communities in the first four centuries of the Common Era. This history will include a brief examination of the treatment of woman in Hebrew and Roman societies that surrounded and influenced the emerging tradition. By drawing from a variety of sources, including secular histories and primary documentation from the era, I hope to provide an understanding of the lives of Christian women in this period. On those issues that there are disputed finding in scholarship I attempt to present all valid perspectives. I then explore the official Vatican version of this historical period, emphasizing those texts the Roman Catholic Church has sanctioned as valid sources of information. Finally, I describe the account presented by feminist theologians, which often draws from unsanctioned writings as well as the official canon and reaches conclusions from the available resources that vary greatly from those espoused by the Church.

#### Jewish and Roman influences on the fledgling community

In the second half of the first century, C.E., a renewal movement emerged in the Jewish communities of Roman occupied Palestine. Fiorenza (1994) asserts that Christianity began with the “Jesus movement... a Jewish movement that is part of Jewish history” (105).<sup>1</sup> Given that

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of the “Jesus movement,” a small but popular movement in Jewish communities of first century Palestine that followed the popular but controversial teaching of Jesus, a man who preached a unique reading of Jewish law, focused more on charity than on rigid adherence to ritual is also asserted by other scholars. See for example: (Shelley, 1995; Whittaker, 1979)



Christianity's key foundational moments emerge out of a movement in the Jewish faith it is important to briefly describe the status of women in Hebrew society in the first century.

William E. Phipps (1992) acknowledges that within Hebrew scripture "a variety of assertive women stand out. Some of them are heroines whose deeds were pivotal to the events of their time" (p.1). Based on Phipps' observations it can be acknowledged that it was accepted that women could play a vital role in society and the faith. However, the day-to-day practices of society placed women in a much lower position than men. Barbara MacHaffie (1986) argues that in ancient Hebrew society "men and the masculine were favored in every aspect of life" (p.5). Further, "only men were full-fledged members of the covenant community and the rite of circumcision made this explicit" (MacHaffie, 1986, p. 6). The life of a woman in this society was dictated by the men in her life, first her father and then her husband. MacHaffie (1986) goes so far as to say that "rabbinic literature regards women as socially and religiously inferior to men" (p. 8). As the "Jesus movement" developed beliefs and practices unique from Judaism it gradually became dissociated from its Jewish roots and emerged as an independent religion with its own set of gender norms.

The distinct character of the Christian faith developed slowly and was influenced not only by its Jewish roots but also by the dominant Greek and Roman culture which surrounded it. While several early scholars and writers in the Christian tradition sought to separate the Christian faith from the pagan practices of the Greco-Roman world, that is clearly not possible since that world had an influence on the emerging religion.<sup>2</sup>

Walter Scheidel (1995) describes the Greco-Roman household code, the norms for domestic behavior including "the idea of women abiding within the house was invariably

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<sup>2</sup> See for example: The works of Origen, Augustine, and Justin Martyr. Available: <http://www.ccel.org/>

assessed in favorable way and more often than not represented as an ideal” (p. 205). Women were seen as more delicate than men and requiring care and labors that befit their fragile constitutions. Thus, as in Jewish cultures, women were generally seen as subordinate to men and in need of the support and governance of men (Scheidel, 1995). Women, like slaves and children, were non-citizens and lacked all the rights and protections citizenship afforded (Scheidel, 1995). Women were generally not educated, were not allowed to own property, and were often considered property rather than people. However, women in the Greco-Roman world did have some rights that their Jewish sisters lacked, such as the right to divorce their husbands (Benko, 1986). Overall, women in Greco-Roman society enjoyed a few more comforts and rights than did women in Jewish households, but in both cases women were considered subordinate to men and it was considered unthinkable that a woman should ever hold a position of authority over men.

#### Women in the Apostolic era of Christianity

The Gospels present an image of women that diverges significantly from the ideals of the Jewish society in which the stories are set. Jesus is presented as interacting with women as individuals and as persons worthy of receiving his message of salvation. Stories such as Jesus’ interaction with the Sumerian woman are regularly held up, both by the Church and by women’s groups, as evidence of the dignity of women in the Christian tradition (Fresen 2005). Phipps (1992) goes so far as to suggest that such stories suggest that “Jesus makes it obvious that he thinks that society needs uppity women” (1992). This theme of empowered women continues, to a limited degree, throughout the New Testament, and into the emerging Christian communities. As the Christian communities grew in size and influence, they quickly became separate from the cultures that surrounded them. Stephen Benko (1986) says that Romans viewed the emergent

sect with suspicion, regarding Christianity as “one of a multitude of degraded foreign cults—‘atrocious and shameful things’ as Tacitus put it—that infested Rome” (p. 21). The Christian communities met before dawn, an act considered sinister to Roman officials, who associated such acts with revolution and coup, and were believed to engage in cannibalism. Such beliefs “gave rise to the summary judgment that Christianity was a disruptive social phenomenon and a danger to the security of the state” (Benko, 1986, p. 21).<sup>3</sup> The result of the belief that Christians were a dangerous and licentious lot who practiced unspeakable acts in secret rituals was widespread persecution that further forced early Christians into hiding. The biblical accounts show that, lacking temples and altars (whether by choice or necessity), the Eucharistic meal, the principle ritual of Christianity, was often held in the homes of widows (Bible, NRSV, 1 Tim 5). Thus, widowed women were considered an important part of the early Christian community, elevating at least one group of women in esteem.

Joan Morris (1973) notes that the Christian communities also diverged from their Jewish roots, explaining that while “Old Testament injunctions regarding the impurity of women during pregnancy and menstruation were carried over into New Testament times, such things were natural and not the fault of the woman and so, she should not be deprived entrance into a Church”(p. 110). Some communities went so far as to say that a woman could receive the sacrament of Baptism and participate in the Eucharistic meal while pregnant (Morris 1973).

Benko (1986) notes that Roman society took issue with the fact that the Christians included women in ritual meals. This condemnation was in part based in the belief that

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<sup>3</sup> Benko notes (1986) “That Christians gathered at daybreak in commemoration of the Eucharist did not occur to Pliny [a principle primary source for Roman history] (how could it?), but he may well have remembered that in Roman history conspiracies against the government and nightly meeting often went hand in hand.” (p. 10-11,).

Christians engaged in orgy at such events, but also in the more general objection of mixing the sexes during a religious ritual. Jewish communities of the period also separated the sexes during religious services. Thus, it can be inferred that the Christian communities were unique in their inclusion of women as equals in participation in religious ritual. This also suggests that women were regarded as full members of the religious community. However, it is not clear from this evidence that women were encouraged, or even permitted, to serve as minister in such rituals.

Archeological evidence includes a large number of memorial images portraying the image of a female person in a posture indicative of those leading prayer (Torjesen, 1998). These archeological finds are particularly significant as they point toward important evidence about the role of women in the biblical world. Karen Torjesen (1998) says that these frescos, or *orans* as they are called by art historians, are found throughout regions where the early church was prevalent and often portrayed an anonymous figure. Most significantly “whether as a solitary figure, or in a setting with other figures, the anonymous *orans* is universally female, and that gendered female image endured for six centuries. In other words, when the figure of the *orans* functions symbolically it is a gendered image” (p.44).<sup>4</sup> Such images suggest that the some women participated in liturgical ministry. Morris (1973), in *The Lady was a Bishop*, discusses images discovered which are equally female but not anonymous. She notes:

In the Church of Saint Praxedis, Rome, there is a mosaic with the word *Episcopa* over the head of a veiled woman, and with the

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<sup>4</sup> Torjensen (1998) notes that such an image has been explained as representing the Church, which is symbolically represented as female (paired with Christ, as bridegroom in a metaphorical marriage relationship). However, she suggests that such an explanation is problematic as it only functions when the female image is paired with a Christ image and *orans* have appeared also as solitary figures or in groups.

name Theodo(ra) down the side. The name has been tampered with and appears as Theodo. But the head is a head of a woman (p. 4)

The title of “*episcopa*” is significant as it refers to episcopal office, that of a bishop. The existence of this and other figures has created something of a conundrum for Biblical scholars and archeologists. It is not clear from such figures whether the individual pictured was truly a member of the ministerial clergy. It is possible that the individuals were being honored as Saints or other holy persons (Morris, 1973). In addition, it is not easy to definitively establish which Christian communities created these images.

There is significant evidence that by the second century CE, the offices of bishop, priest (presbyter), and deacon were already established and understood as having different responsibilities. Early Church writer Clement of Rome suggested that the episcopate and presbyterate were ministries that had roots in the Levitical Priesthood established by Moses. Further, just as Moses had declared a line through which priestly validity was to be determined, so too had Jesus, through his apostles. Specifically Clement of Rome suggested that:

Our apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, and there would be strife on account of the office of the episcopate. For this reason, therefore, inasmuch as they had obtained a perfect fore-knowledge of this, they appointed those [ministers] already mentioned, and afterwards gave instructions, that when these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry (ch XLVI)

Key to Clement’s argument is that the episcopate was an established office with established rites for transference of power. However, given that there is disagreement among translators about

whether Clements' use of "approved men" meant all peoples or only males, it is not clear from this evidence alone if women were excluded officially from such ministerial offices.

Overall, the scholarly evidence paints a picture of a society that was open to women and willing to include them as full members of the faith community. Women in early Christian society were considered important members of the Church and were not excluded from participation by virtue of their sex. However, it is not clear if this participation included leadership roles in those communities that endured and evolved into the present faith tradition.

The Roman Catholic Church is very proud of the pro-women history of the early Church. Almost universally, modern documents defending the current prohibition against the ordination of women claim that such an injunction does not detract from the dignity of women. The argument is that Church has from its inception been an organization that affirms and nurtures the dignity of women. For example, Pope John Paul II (1988) in his Apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* argued that:

In calling only men as his Apostles, Christ acted in a complete and sovereign manner, In doing so he exercised the same freedom with which, in all of his behavior, he emphasized the dignity and the vocation of women, without conforming to the prevailing customs and to the traditions sanctioned by the legislation of the time (§1)

The implication is that the exclusion of women from the priesthood was an intentional act by Christ. Further, this act cannot be interpreted as having been influenced by the anti-woman sentiments of the prevailing cultural norms because in so many other incidents Christ is portrayed as ignoring those mores of the time and engaging with women as equals worthy of his message of salvation. The Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) report argues that "Considering

the social and cultural milieu in which Jesus lived, his teachings with regard to women are striking in their newness” (1975 §3). This sentiment is a theme that prevails throughout modern papal arguments.

Concerning evidence that suggests that women were afforded the right to serve in any ministerial role other than deacon during this period, the Church argues that such practices occurred only in heretical and Gnostic sects. Pope Paul VI (1976) asserted in his *Inter Insigniores* that “The Catholic Church has never felt that priestly or episcopal ordination can be validly conferred on women” (§6). He continues “a few heretical sects in the first centuries, especially Gnostic ones, entrusted the exercise of priestly ministry to women; this innovation was immediately noted and condemned by the Fathers, who considered it as unacceptable in the Church.” (1976, §7). The Pope then attempts to distinguish prejudices against women from the injunction against women in ministry, stating that “It is true that in the writings of the Fathers one will find the undeniable influence of prejudices unfavorable to women, but nevertheless, it should be noted that these prejudices had hardly any influence on their pastoral activity and still less on their spiritual direction” (§8). This statement reinforces an important precept of the Church, specifically that fundamental beliefs of Church doctrine are not sullied by the human failings of those who assert them.

The writings of the accepted Patristic scholars also provide a useful understanding of the role of women.<sup>5</sup> Clement of Rome’s description of proper behavior for a Christian man includes the statement to “let us direct our wives to that which is good. Let them exhibit the lovely habit

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<sup>5</sup> Patristic scholarship includes the work of those theologians writing from the fall of the second temple in 70 CE to the conclusion of great church councils (approximately 600 CE). Some of the theologians of this period were initially influential only to be considered heretical when their position conflicted with that finally adopted by official Church doctrine. (Shelley, 1995)

of purity [in all their conduct]; let them show forth the sincere disposition of meekness; let them make manifest the command which they have of their tongue, by their manner<sup>\*c</sup> of speaking” (Ch. XXI).<sup>6</sup> This may be read as a reiteration of Pauline injunctions for women to be quiet and direct questions of the faith to their husbands at appropriately discreet times. Additionally, this suggests a call for women to be demure and not involve themselves in public affairs. Ignatius of Antioch extolled women to “be ye subject to your husbands in the fear of God.” (Ch. IV). Iranaeus suggests it was because of the stain of Eve that Christ had to be born of a woman “For indeed the enemy would not have been fairly vanquished, unless it had been a man [born] of a woman who conquered him. For it was by means of a woman that he got the advantage over man at first, setting himself up as man’s opponent” (Ch. XXI, §549). Thus while a woman was involved in the salvation of man it is also clear that women were still considered culpable for the fall. Clement of Alexandria was far more derisive toward women, suggesting that they were weak of mind and character with comments such as “For to children and women especially laughter is the cause of slipping into scandal” (ch. V). From the opinions of these early theologians a picture emerges that suggests women remained subjugated members of the community in early Christian society.

The prominent feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1983) opens her analysis of the Pauline text *First letter to the Corinthians* with the assertion:

Paul’s interpretation and adaptation of the baptismal declaration Gal 3:28 in his letters to the community of Corinth unequivocally affirm the equality and charismatic giftedness of women and men in the Christian community. Women as well as men are prophets

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<sup>6</sup> Translator footnote: \*c: Some read, “by their silence.”



and leaders in the community. Women as well as men have the call to a marriage-free life. Women as well as men have mutual rights and obligations within the sexual relationship of marriage. (in Meeks, 2007, p.623-624)

Fiorenza's argument, that women were regarded as equal to men in the faith community of the biblical era Christian society is at the foundation of the women's ordination movement's interpretations of biblical era Christian society. Clearly, there is disagreement about the role women actually played.

#### *The Great Church Councils*

In 313, the Roman Emperor Constantine I granted official recognition to the Christian community (McManners, 2002). This guaranteed Christians full freedom of religious worship and full recognition as citizens of the State. It also ended nearly three centuries of brutal persecution under the law. Sanction from Rome had a profound influence on the Christian faith. As the religious practice was brought into the public eye, it became subject to the social norms and mores of Rome. Recognition quickly gave way to favor, prompted in large part by the dramatic conversion experience of Constantine which he credited for an unlikely victory in battle (Shelley, 1995). The result was that "the despised and persecuted 'superstition' called Christianity rather suddenly [arose] from the shadows of Roman society and assume[d], almost overnight, the spiritual leadership of the vast and powerful empire." (Shelley, 1995, p. 51). However this new position of power and leadership brought with it public scrutiny. Many of the inconsistencies and disagreements over doctrine that plagued the community became critical points of contention that required resolution for the sake of peace in the State.

In 325, Emperor Constantine I called the first of several great ecumenical councils aimed at resolving disparities in the practice of Christianity and uniting the faith under a single doctrinal tradition (L'Huillier, 1996). The Council of Nicaea was the first of four councils held over the next century which would establish doctrine and traditions for the Church that would be declared inviolable by Pope Gregory and would serve to guide Church practices into modern times (L'Huillier, 1996).

These councils addressed profound questions of belief such as the exact nature of Christ's divinity and the relationship of the three persons of the Trinitarian God, as well as more practical issues such as the installation of clergy and the status of persons who had been members of sects that were deemed heretical by the councils. Among the important issues taken on by these councils was the office of the priesthood, and the role of women in the practice of the faith. Decisions made during the Great Councils had a profound impact on the position of women in the Roman Catholic Church and established binding understandings of the proper place for women in the Church, which guide Church practices to this day.

#### The Council of Nicaea

In Dan Brown's (2003) *The Da Vinci Code*, he implies that one of the primary purposes of the Council of Nicaea was to eradicate a feminist tradition in the Christian community (see also R.E. Brown, 1985). However, in reality the role of women was not a primary concern of the Council. Only one of the twenty canons of the Council of Nicaea mentions women directly (L'Huillier, 1996). However, many of the canons would have an influence on the role of women in the codified Church.

Canon 3 of the Council at Nicaea asserts that:

The great council absolutely forbids any bishop, priest, deacon, or any other member of the clergy to have a woman living with him, unless she is a mother, a sister, an aunt, or any other woman completely above suspicion. (in L'Huillier, 1996, p. 34)

This ruling is significant in that it implies that women are a source of temptation and defilement, for why else would it be considered anathema for celibate men and women to cohabit. In addition, this canon operates under the assumption that all members of the clergy would be male as there would be no scandal in two chaste women cohabiting. It is also important to note that at the time this Canon was adopted, it was acceptable for members of the clergy to marry.

Women were permitted to hold the position of deaconess, a position identical to that of deacon. However, all Canons concerning clergy, including those pertaining expressly to deacons, use exclusively masculine language forms. While this can be written off as the convention of the day, it is significant to note as it set a precedent that can be read in modern times as confirming the intention that only men should serve in ministerial roles.

### The Councils of Constantinople and Ephesus

The Councils of Constantinople and Ephesus presented little doctrine that directly effected the lives of women, as they focused largely on the development of the codex text for the bible. While none of the rulings were specifically directed at the lives of women, the texts selected would have a profound influence on women for the enduring history of the Church. For example, works such as *the Gospel of Mary (Magdalene)* were not considered, or even mentioned (King, 1998). Other works that provided positive treatment of women were excluded from the final codex, and works that included content that suggested a subordinate role for women were eventually included. I do not suggest that works were included or excluded based

on the discussion of women alone, or even as a major influence. The Council at Nicaea had established a comprehensive statement of belief, and works were largely chosen based on how soundly they supported those beliefs (L'Huillier, 1996). However, it is not unreasonable to assume that works which suggested that women were equal to men, or which even suggested that some women had been chosen over certain men (as is implied in surviving remnants of the *Gospel of Mary*) would be deemed suspect for including such arguments (King, 1998).

In addition, Christian sects, particularly those that ascribed to a Gnostic philosophy such as the Montastists, were officially declared heretics and expelled from the church by declarations in the Council of Constantinople. While the chief heresy of the Montastists was that their definitions of the God-head of the faith did not recognize the triune nature of God, it is known that the sect ordained women to serve in full ministerial roles, a practice condemned by codified Church doctrine (Van der Meer, 1969; L'Huillier, 1996). By establishing a codex which excluded texts friendly to women, and by condemning those communities which allowed women to serve fully in clerical roles, the Councils of Constantine and Ephesus established a foundation for the oppression of women within the Catholic Church that would emerge during the Middle Ages.

#### Council of Chalcedon

The Council of Chalcedon, held in 451 CE, had the most to say directly concerning the role of women in the Church. Specifically, this Council took on the contentious issue of women in the clerical orders. Canon 15 asserts:

A woman must not be ordained deacon before the age of 40 and that after a careful inquiry. If after received ordination and having exercised her ministry for some time, she wants to marry, thereby

scorning the grace of God, let her be excommunicated as well as  
 him who has united himself to her. (in L'Huillier, 1996, p. 243)

Especially significant is the use of the term “ordination.” L'Huillier (1996) argues that “the text of canon 15 of Chalcedon leaves no doubt about the sacramental nature of the diaconate...It is, therefore, clear that at least in this period in the East, we are not dealing with an inferior order.” (p. 245). However, L'Huillier (1996) is also careful to clarify that “it is no less certain that we cannot speak of a priestly order.”<sup>7</sup> This canon gives credibility to the interpretations of certain *orans*, discussed in the previous section, as representing ordained women. However, L'Huillier also suggests this ruling was the result of a compromise and later councils would eventually put an end to the ordination of women as deacons, even severely limiting the power of those women who led orders of consecrated virgins (orders of nuns).

#### *Women in the Middle Ages*

As the Church, and the Holy Roman Empire, grew in power and influence, its beliefs and practices spread across Europe and Northern Africa significantly influencing the societies already in existence. While it had been the rule of the Roman Empire to allow conquered peoples to live and worship according to their own beliefs, the Catholic Church sought to convert all conquered peoples to Christianity (Shelley, 1995). The Roman Catholic Church became the rule of law and the moral consciousness of the entire empire (Shelley, 1995). Among the doctrines brought by the Catholic Church were particular beliefs about women. In some ways, the rise of the Catholic Church was a boon for women and resulted in more equitable treatment in the

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<sup>7</sup> L'Huillier connects this to the constant tradition of the Church, however, it can also be connected to previous councils which clearly asserted that “let deacons stay within the limits of their assigned roles remembering that, on one hand, they are the servers of the bishops, and on the other they are inferior to priests.” (Canon 18 of Nicaea, in L'Huillier p. 76-77)

Middle Ages compared to previous periods. The injunctions against polygamy and divorce in particular helped to elevate women in societies where the keeping of concubines was common (Oakley, 1974).<sup>8</sup> A woman in this era could also inherit a fief and was allowed to control a fiefdom in her name (Oakley, 1974). However, while this was somewhat of an improvement from a life of concubinage or the constant threat of divorce on the whim of their husbands, women in the Middle Ages were still very much second-class citizens.

While women had some rights, they were in no way considered equal to men. Medieval society was generally divided into three estates: the aristocracy, the commoners, and the clergy. Jeffery L. Singman (1999) suggests that it is reasonable to consider women to constitute a fourth estate. Singman (1999) argues that “the aristocracy, commoners, and clergy all included women, but to some degree these women had more in common with each other than with men of their own estate” (p. 14). Officially, women were considered subordinate to a man in their life, generally a father or husband, and had very limited rights and no official position in public society (Oakley, 1974; Singman, 1999). Women, even among the aristocracy, had very limited educational opportunities, the best being among the women in a nun’s cloister (Singman, 1999; MacHaffie, 1986). Women were expected to work in the home and occupy themselves with work befitting their delicate nature such as weaving or needlework (Singman, 1999).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Under Christianity, rules requiring fidelity in a marriage were applied equally to men and women. In contrast, in Judaism at the time the burden of fidelity was only held by the woman, and only a man could petition for divorce. Women in the era of the Roman Empire could be divorced for failing to produce an heir and fidelity was not expected or required of men. ("Marriage")

<sup>9</sup> Singman does acknowledge that common women had more freedom to work outside of the home, doing work in the fields, however such work did not significantly increase the potential influence of such women.

Women were seen as weak minded and burdened with the sin of Eve (Wijngaards, 2001). Concerns regarding the dangers of women living with men in joint monasteries or even virgins or widows taking up residence in priest or bishops rectory were so strong that such actions created scandal, a concern to avoid such scandal pervaded the texts of canonical synods and councils throughout the period (L'Huillier, 1996). A major concern was that women were apt to elicit impure thoughts from men. Wijngaards (2001) explains that “for medieval theologians, every woman carries the curse of sin. The consequences were that God punished her by subjecting her to man and this punishment was irreversible” (p.85). According to Barbara J. MacHaffie (1986) “this virulent misogyny (a hatred and distrust of women) reached its peak in the witch craze which swept across Europe from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries”(p. 43) but had clear origins in the earlier medieval period.

Concurrent with this perspective of women as the source of sin and “the effective cause of damnation,” (Wijngaards, 2001, p. 85) was an idealized reverence for women. The courtly customs associated with medieval chivalry placed women on a pedestal as objects to be admired (Oakley, 1974; Singman 1999). Medieval poetry strongly demonstrates that the idealization of women was “in sharp contrast to the subordinate status ordinarily accorded by medieval men to their women... The beloved lady is represented [in love poems] as being superior [in virtue] to her lover” (Singman, 1999, p. 198). Such sentiment did little to improve the status of women or provide them with a real source of influence in society. It is difficult to challenge society and to take action in the world when one is regarded as either a passive emblem of virtue and grace or a symbol of eternal sin.

Despite the existence of a system which significantly restricted women, many women of the period found ways to influence their society and the Church. MacHaffie (1986) describes

how women chose to live in ascetic communities which “gave women physical protection from both the risks of childbearing and from the risks of living alone in a society that became increasingly unstable and dangerous as the rule of Rome disintegrated” (p. 47). In addition, “the ascetic life also often gave women freedom to travel,” as well as to learn reading and writing (MacHaffie, 1986, p.47). Women scholars, such as Christine de Pisan and Isotta Nogarola, used prose and poetry to protest the prevailing perceptions of women (MacHaffie, 1986). Many women were able to find lives of influence and education within the walls of a cloister.

### Women in Religious Life during the Middle Ages

Gary Macy (2001) opens his *Hidden History of Women’s Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West* with the potentially contentious statement “The fact that women were ordained for the first twelve hundred years of Christianity will surprise many people” (p. vii). Macy (2001) then goes on to explain the concept of “ordination” meant something very different in the early Middle Ages from what it is understood to denote in the modern Church. What Macy shows is that women held important, though limited roles in the Church that were conferred by a sacramental consecration. Macy is not suggesting that women in this period held the role now understood as priest or bishop. Instead, he is articulating an argument about the Church’s understanding of what sacramental ordination meant and how it was a fluid and changing concept, not one which had endured from the earliest foundations of the Church.

The final trend of the Middle Ages that is important to understanding the role of women in the Church is the emergence of faith communities such as convents. Macy (2001) and MacHaffie (1986) both observe that within the confines of these communities women enjoyed a freedom that was not available in secular society. According to MacHaffie (1986), “the monasteries for women were also headed by women, giving them an opportunity to exercise



authority and leadership within the institutional sphere of the Christian Community” (p.47). The rights and responsibilities of the abbesses who led these communities often extended beyond the nuns in the community. In fact, “in many places, they enjoyed the same powers and privileges as abbots, bishops, and noblemen” Women in these communities often “oversaw the affairs of clergy and lay people who lived in often vast lands owned by the abbey, and they answered only to the Pope in Rome, not to the local bishop” (MacHaffie, 1986, p. 47). By the time of the Reformation however, the power of the abbess was in sharp decline. The Council of Trent in 1563 finished the job, completely stripping abbesses of any power outside the walls of the cloister (MacHaffie, 1986). Several emergent faith communities, such as the Cathari and the Waldenses, allowed women to serve in leadership roles and to preach. However, these movements were deemed heretical by the Vatican and were eliminated in the early period of the Inquisition (Shelley, 1995). While the positions enjoyed by women in abbeys and marginal faith communities gives some credence to the position that women were not barred from ministerial responsibilities wholesale, the fact remains that for most women the Middle Ages were not a period of religious freedom or empowerment.

Overall, the Middle Ages was a period of contradiction, women were granted significantly more rights and protections than they had enjoyed during the Roman Empire, but they were still regarded as second class citizens. As the Church further established its traditions and codified the law, the rights of women were increasingly reduced. By the Renaissance, women held little to no power in any area of the Church, including the abbey.

#### *The Reformation.*

In 1517, a troubled Catholic monk put together a list of ninety-five theses in need of theological debate and posted the document on the doors of the castle Church in Wittenberg,

Germany (Shelley, 1995). Martin Luther's act of defiance and heresy shook the Roman Catholic Church to its core. Luther's exodus from the Roman Catholic Church was a precursor to a storm of fighting and division that would result in the splintering of Western Christianity as well as significant reforms in the institutional Church of Rome. While the effects of the Reformation were felt throughout all of Western Civilization, I will focus solely on the key ways in which women, as they were regarded by the Roman Catholic Church, were effected.

On one level, the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation of the Roman Catholic Church were a boon to women. While the burgeoning Protestant church eliminated the convent and the option of consecrated life for women, the Roman Catholic Church began to grow and expand religious communities (MacHaffie, 1986). In a spirit of reform, "the new orders were established with the goal of serving other people through nursing, education, and care for the poor." An innovation of these new communities permitted "women who joined ... to be out in society." (MacHaffie, 1986, p.66). Religious communities such as the Daughters of Charity were permitted to leave the seclusion of the cloister and participate in society, allowing them greater freedoms, but still providing many of the securities and comforts of religious life. While the Council of Trent:

Reiterated with force that the earlier decrees that women living in religious orders should be cloistered in communities, shut off from the world, and strictly disciplined... The new orders provided significant role models of women who were involved publically in the duties of teaching, nursing, and social work. (MacHaffie, p.67)

The door was open for women to begin to take a more active role in the world.

Despite some of the advantages it brought, the Counter-Reformation also resulted in a revival of anti-woman sentiment. Mary Daly (1968) explains how “Ignatius of Loyola...saw a similarity between women and Satan” (p.59) and “Dominic Seto...held that the female sex is a natural impediment to the reception of Holy Orders.” (p. 59). In response to societal discomfort at seeing women working in public, the Council of Trent attempted to reinstate the rule of the cloister, with limited success. In addition, the Council also reiterated the exclusion of women from the sacrament of Holy Orders and forbade the investiture of women in roles of leadership through any sacramental ceremony (see: <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/>).

While the changes of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation provided numerous opportunities for growth and change, the overall result was that women remained subjected to the role of the subordinate sex. In some ways, the reaction of the Roman Catholic Church to return more heavily to tradition and hierarchy resulted in increased oppression for women, a situation that would not change significantly until the twentieth century.

#### *The Enlightenment and the Era of Modernity*

In the years that followed the reformation the Roman Catholic Church faced a new threat—the secularization of European society. John McManners (2002) explains that as a result of the splintering of the faith by the reformation “religion was on its way to becoming a matter of intense personal decision” (p.277). The consequence of the disintegration of a single universal church was the relegation of religion to private life. Church membership remained an important aspect of social and political life, as bloody feuds in England and the violent assault on Huguenots in France clearly demonstrate. However, the role religion played in public life was greatly diminished.

Many of the major outcomes for women garnered by the growth of secular society benefited protestant women more than those still within the Catholic faith. By the middle of the nineteenth century denominations such as Quakers, Unitarians, and Methodists were allowing women to serve in ministry (Hunt, 2004). Phyllis Mack (1998) reports that British Quakers had been permitting women to speak during religious meeting almost from the inception of the Society of Friends. Such practices were by no means the rule and were condemned both by the Catholic Church and by most Protestant denominations. However, the existence of Christian communities that allowed women to participate fully in their faith and did not teach that women were inferior to men by design was a revelation that had lasting effects.

For most Catholic women the effects of burgeoning women's movements would be limited to those changes that effected the whole of society. Overall, the Catholic Church encouraged traditional roles for women and criticized any allowances for women serving in church or stepping outside those traditional roles to any meaningful degree. For example, Pope Benedict XIV made several declarations regarding women during his tenure in the nineteenth century. Specifically, Benedict XIV (1755) condemned the "evil practice of women serving the priest in the celebration of the Mass" (§29) Benedict did allow for women to visit Rome during the 1749 year of Jubilee, with specific conditions, saying:

We do not discourage even women from coming to Rome at the time of the year of Jubilee, if it is for their good and they are not bound by laws of enclosure... We beseech those who are entrusted with the protection of discipline and morals to guard carefully against the sins which easily arise from young women when they encounter those of different character, disposition, and sex. (§ 7)

The small allowance of permitting women to travel to the Holy capital is tempered with comment about the need to protect women because they are particularly vulnerable to temptation.

Modernity was attacked most vehemently in the Anathemas of the First Vatican Council. Many of the founding principles of the Enlightenment, especially those which challenged religious truth, were condemned. The belief that the church could be fallible or might adjust long held positions was similarly condemned. The Council declared that “If anyone declares it is possible that at some time, given the advancement of knowledge, a sense may be assigned to the dogmas propounded by the church which is different from that which the church has understood and understands: let him be **Anathema**.” (1870, canon 4, bold in original). Through these declarations the Church held that it was opposed to the changes in society, including the changing role of women.

Despite this hard line position in favor of traditional roles and continued silence in church, women did receive some boon from the advancements of the Enlightenment age. Girls were educated in the schools opened by religious orders, receiving basic lessons in reading and writing in addition to religious instruction (McManners, 2002). While literacy did not ensure better opportunities for women in Enlightenment era Europe, it did provide access to new ideas and an understanding of the world that had not previously been available. For the most part the education of women was limited to elementary skills and many in the period still objected to the education of women but there was a movement in the church seeking to help all the faithful “to be able to read simple devotional literature” (McManners, 2002, p. 294). Despite these inroads into education, the Church still pushed the belief that a woman’s place was in the home caring for children.

Feminist critic Mary Daly (1968) argues that the gains of this period were minimal at best and that in “the centuries that followed the Middle Ages theological opinion concerning women did not change radically” (p. 58). Daly (1968) also argues that while the Church did encourage the inclusion of girls in elementary education, such training did not constitute a move toward equality. The vehement opposition of the Church to coeducation because “the two [sexes are] quite different in organism, in temperament, in ability [so there could not be] anything to suggest that there can be or ought to be promiscuity, and much less equality, in the training of the two sexes,” (p.67) suggests to Daly a continuation of oppression. That the Church associated coeducation and equality with promiscuity and required separate education supported “the illusion that women are inferior in ability” (p. 67).

While the Church attempted to keep women in the home and satisfied with small concessions like a basic education, changes in society were working against it. The changing economy of industrial age had pushed women outside of the home and into the workplace. Social and political rights, such as suffrage, gave women a voice in secular society. By the middle of the twentieth century, Catholic women were beginning to ask for a voice in their Church as well.

*From Vatican II to the Present*

When Pope John XXIII began the Vatican II Council proceedings in the 1960's the status of women in the church and in the world was an important issue in the debate. Due to centuries of subservience, it was necessary for the church to reassert the dignity and equality of women as being created in the image of God and imbued with a soul. However, while the Roman Catholic Church had become quite vocal in the debate regarding the equality of dignity of women and men, they also continued to argue that that this should not be equated with sameness. The church asserted that men and women have been given different gifts that are inherent in the

nature of their sex. The church promoted the view of women as natural teachers and nurturers. Women are seen as natural caretakers, and as individuals singled out to be protectors and shepherds of life. While one might believe that these are characteristics that would fit ideally the model of priestly ministry, the Church argued that these characteristics are evidence that women are in fact called to other roles. Pope John Paul II (2004), representing the Roman Catholic Church, argues that:

In this perspective, one understands how the reservation of priestly ordination solely to men does not hamper in any way women's access to the heart of Christian life. Women are called to be unique examples and witnesses for all Christians of how the Bible is to respond in love to the love of the Bridegroom. (§ 16)

This argument also highlights the importance of the marriage metaphor in the role of priests in the Roman Catholic Church. The Church is seen as the bride, in this context the Church includes the entire community of the faithful, and Christ, or his representative the priest, is imagined as the bridegroom.

The 1988 Encyclical Letter by Pope John Paul II, “On the Dignity and Vocation of Women,” provided one of the most complete accounts of the Vatican’s stance on women and their place in the Church and the world. The Encyclical opened by quoting from the Vatican II proceedings: “The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect, and a power never hitherto achieved” (§ 1). However, this new power and influence of women would be adapted to the special “dignity and vocation of women,” (§ 1) which did not include the priesthood.

Despite the lip service given to the burgeoning role of women in society at large, the Pope (John Paul II, 1988) still focused on the two traditional roles for women advocated by the church for centuries, those of mother or “virgin for the kingdom” (nun) (§17). The Pope (1988) went so far as to argue that “we must now focus our meditation on virginity and motherhood as two particular dimensions of the fulfillment of the female personality” (§ 17). These two dimensions are described as being perfectly united in the person of Mary, mother of God, leading to the conclusion: “Virginity and motherhood coexisted in her: they do not mutually exclude each other or place special limits on each other. Indeed, the person of the mother of God helps everyone—especially women—to see how these two dimensions, these two paths in the vocation of women as persons, explain and complete each other” (§ 17). The message implied by this is that virginity and motherhood are equal to one another, and both natural choices for women. Further they are not necessarily mutually exclusive, in that women in the convent may still serve in a nurturing, maternal role. However, it is also suggested that these are the only two worthy options for women of faith.

The 1988 Encyclical also reiterated the idea that Jesus was not beholden to the traditions of his time and in many cases interacted with women in ways that were frowned upon in first century Judea. This is used as evidence that “in calling only men as his apostles, Christ acted in a completely free and sovereign manner. In doing so he exercised the same freedom with which, in all of his behavior, he emphasized the dignity and the vocation of women without conforming to prevailing customs and to the traditions sanctioned by the legislation of the time” (§26). This argument served two purposes. First, it defends the claim that the reservation of holy orders only to men is in keeping with the divine will of Christ. Second, it refuted the argument that the reason that Christ only called men to be Apostles was in keeping with the customs of the day and



should not restrict future Church action. Asserting that the actions of Christ that serve as the paradigm for Church law were not influenced by the norms of the day and that Jesus acted with free will absolved the Church of any need to bend to the will of the prevailing culture of the moment

The women's ordination movement and the Vatican 'No'.

While there are several historical examples of individuals who argued for the inclusion of women into the clergy of the Roman Catholic Church, the movement itself can be seen as beginning with the radical reforms of the Vatican II Council.<sup>10</sup> Lavinia Byrne (1994) states that "peace and freedom were offered to the Roman Catholic Church by the second Vatican Council. The Council reordered the Roman Catholic imagination by reminding everyone of the fullness of their baptismal call. It spoke with new voice and with new enthusiasm about discerning the signs of these times" (p.15). Among the important signs of the time, that many hoped would influence the reorganizing Roman Catholic Church, was the changing role of women in society. The 1960s saw women leaving the home to work in the wider community. Not only were women permeating the workplace they were also taking on new roles of leadership. Those who hoped that this model might be reflected in the church and the opening of holy orders to women were encouraged when the Vatican II Council took on the question of women's ordination. However, this encouragement quickly became despair as document after document came out asserting the continuation of the male-only priesthood.

In 1971 by decree of Pope Paul VI, a Pontifical Commission on the Status of Women in the Church and Society was established in order "to identify the proper place of women in the

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<sup>10</sup> The RCWP rely on figures such as St. Teresa of Avila, St. Joan of Arc, and St Therese of Lisieux who had been open about their desire for holy orders to establish a historical backing for their efforts.

church" (in Gardiner, 1975, p. 15). In 1972, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) took the stance that women are not to be ordained in a report titled, *Theological Reflections on the Ordination of Women*," which argued that "theologians and canonists have been unanimous *until modern times* in considering this exclusion (of women) as absolute and of divine origin." (in Gardiner, 1975, p. 19). At the Papal level, the issue remained unresolved and the Pontifical Commission continued to investigate the issue.

In 1974, a group of Roman Catholic women began to organize and formed the Women's Ordination Conference (WOC). The group, which was comprised largely of American Catholics, made no secret of their goals or actions. The overarching mission of this group was to raise the issue of the ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church and to force the church to examine "the conflict between official Church pronouncements and the spirit of the Gospel with its message of freedom of persons through the redemptive activity of Jesus Christ." (Gardiner, 1975, p. 4). In an effort to ensure, "the conference would take place in the church... [That] there would be nothing extralegal or irregular in its planned program including its liturgical celebrations," the group made efforts to inform the hierarchical church, beginning with letters sent to the American Bishops in January of 1975 (Gardiner, 1975, p. 6). In November of 1975, the WOC held its first convention in Detroit Michigan without sanction from the official Church. While the meeting of the WOC was not endorsed by the NCCB or the Vatican, the hierarchy also did not condemn the activity.

The 1976 Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) which had been tasked with considering whether there was scriptural evidence to allow women to become priests concluded the following:

It does not seem that the New Testament by itself will permit us to settle in a clear way and finally the problem of the possible ascension of women to the presbyterate.

It continued:

However, some think that in the scriptures there are sufficient indications to exclude this possibility, considering that the sacrament of the Eucharist and reconciliation have a special link with the person of Christ and therefore with the male hierarchy, as borne out by the New Testament.

It continued:

Others, on the contrary, wonder if the church hierarchy, interested with the sacramental economy, would be able to entrust the ministries of Eucharist and reconciliation to women in light of the circumstances, without going against Christ's original intentions.

(PBC, 1975, §2)

The nebulous nature of these conclusions resulted in varied interpretations. Opponents of the ordination of women saw the conclusions of the PBC as affirming the argument that male-only clergy were divinely intended. In contrast, those who supported the ordination of women saw the failure of the pontifical Biblical commission to provide definitive scriptural evidence prohibiting the ordination of women as a victory. Members of the women's ordination movement continue to use the pontifical Biblical commission conclusions in their arguments against the exclusion of women from holy orders.

The hope and promise inspired by the results of the pontifical Biblical commission were largely extinguished, when in October of 1976, Pope Paul VI issued a declaration on the possibility of the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood. The papal declaration, *Inter Insigniores*, outlines the position of the church regarding the ordination of women drawing the conclusion that while the church recognizes the inherent equal dignity of women, "The Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination" (Paul VI, 1976, §5). Pope Paul VI (1976) does admit that some of the medieval Scholastic theology used to establish the continuity of the tradition of only calling men to the priestly order "often represent[s] arguments on this point that modern thought, would have difficulty in admitting or would even rightly reject"(§7). However, the Pope defends the position of the Church saying:

The Church's tradition in the matter has thus been so firm in the course of the centuries that the Magisterium has not felt the need to intervene in order to formulate a principle which was not attacked, or to defend a law which was not challenged. But each time this tradition had the occasion to manifest itself, it is witness to the church's desire to conform to the model left to her by the Lord. The same tradition has been faithfully safeguarded by the churches of the East. The unanimity on this point is all the more remarkable since in many other questions their discipline admits of a great diversity at the present time these same churches refuse to associate themselves with requests directed toward securing dissension of women to priestly ordination. (Paul VI, 1976, § 8)

In essence, the church holds to the position that reserving priestly ministry to men is a matter of sacred tradition and was the will of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Church cannot allow women into the ordained Orders without violating Divine Will.

Revisions to canon law in 1983 further solidified these differences between clergy and laity and men and women. The revision to the code of Canon Law did make some effort to acknowledge the equality of the baptized. Among those changes included in the revision was a provision to reverse a rule that restricted all ministries of the altar to males. Thus, the hierarchy of the Church acknowledged that it acceptable for women to enter the sanctuary to serve as "readers, mass servers, cantors, preachers, leaders of prayer services, ministers of baptism and communion."(Code of Canon Law, 1983, can230, §3). However, the revised Canon law retains the restriction that only "laymen who possess the agent qualifications determined by decree of the conference of Bishops can be installed on a stable basis in the ministries of lector and acolyte in accord with the prescribed liturgical rite." (Code of Canon Law, 1983, can.230 §1). The lay ministries of lector and acolyte are formally installed rites for readers and altar servers, respectively. In past centuries, these ministries were intended as steps towards ordination; however, they were not orders in and of themselves. The revisions to the Code also reasserted Canon 1024 that "only a baptized male validly receives sacred ordination." The result of these revisions was to solidify the position of the church that women were exclusively a part of the laity.

Despite the fact that the church had taken a definitive stance on the issue of the ordination of women, many within the church continued to debate the issue and groups such as the WOC continue to meet and work to petition the Vatican to reverse its ruling. An important group in this movement was Fiorenza's Women-Church (Hunt, 1996). Originally a part of the WOC, the

group Women-church grew into its own movement and held conferences in 1983 and 1987 (Hunt, 1996). Similar to the WOC conference in 1976, a major element of the Women--church movement was a mission to recast the model of Church and episcopal leadership making it an important predecessor to the RCWP. Women-church became an important focal point for the entire feminist movement in the 1980s, attracting significant figures such as Gloria Steinman and Mary Daly (Hunt, 1996). In her examination of the movement, scholar Carol Jablonski (1988) observes that the combination of commitments to the Catholic Church and the progressive mission of women-church forced a paradoxical identity on its members, making it likely that many individuals involved would leave the Catholic Church in search of more open religious environments. Both the WOC and Women-church have endured and help constitute the larger movement for women's ordination of which the RCWP is a now part.

In response to the endurance of movements such as the WOC and women church, Pope John Paul II issued an apostolic letter in 1994 attempting to settle the issue of ordination once and for all. In the letter titled *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, the Pope (1994) outlined the many reasons given in the past that "the Church does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination" (§2). The Pope also attempted to separate the exclusion of women from the priesthood from other acts that oppress women and deny them dignity and power saying:

Furthermore, the fact that the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, received neither the mission proper to the Apostles nor the ministerial priesthood clearly shows that the non-admission of women to priestly ordination cannot mean that women are of lesser dignity, nor can it be construed as discrimination against them. Rather it is to be seen as the faithful

observance of a plan ascribed to the Wisdom of the Lord of the Universe. (John Paul II, 1994, § 3)

By arguing that the Blessed Virgin Mary, the primary example of virtue in the Catholic Church, was intentionally excluded from the ministerial priesthood, the Pope is attempting to suggest that all women are excluded by virtue of divine will and not due to some deficit in the nature of women. *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* is especially important as it was this document that established the position of the Vatican regarding the exclusion of women from holy orders as a matter that could be considered in ex cathedra (Wijngaards, 2001).

John Wijngaards (2001), a former priest who resigned due to the Church's refusal to accept women in the priesthood, argues that the Marian arguments are problematic because until the late Middle Ages Mary was venerated as a priest, often being depicted in priestly garb in devotional art. He clarifies that "all Christian believers share in Christ's priesthood, but the priestly role ascribed to Mary went well beyond the common priesthood of the faithful." (Wijngaards, 2001, p. 157). His argument is that "if Mary is a priest, than any woman can be priest."(p.156). Considering the argument of the Church appears to be that since Mary was *not* a priest, than no woman may be a priest, Wijngaards' logic makes sense, however, it is not able to sway the stance of the Church.

### The Emergence of the RCWP

In the previous chapter, I described how, in June of 2002, a group of Seven Catholic women boarded a ship in Passau, Austria and received Holy Orders while sailing down the Danube River. The RCWP movement began long before the fateful event that thrust it into the spotlight of Catholic radicalism. Many of the women involved in the movement, particularly several members of the original Danube Seven, had been involved in the women's ordination

movement since the Vatican II Council. Dagmar Braun Celeste (2008), one of the first women to be ordained, had been a part of the WOC and participated in the first conference in 1974. She describes how she began discernment for the priesthood in earnest in 2000, after several years of discussing the possibility of ordaining women without the sanction of Rome with others involved in the movement.<sup>11</sup> The decision to ordain was actually made in 1996 at the First European Women's Synod, and after three years of development, Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger (2008), a principal player in the movement, introduced a program for preparation designed for women seeking to enter the Catholic priesthood. Gisela Forester (2008), also among those ordained on the Danube, describes the experience:

For years before, they had met one another in monasteries and other special places, had lighted candles, hoped and wept, argued and wrung their hands. Their aim was clear: They all wanted to be ordained as women priests, they were all qualified to become priests, but the Vatican did not allow women to be ordained. Therefore, the women had to begin the process on their own. When they were ready, they would be ordained by a valid male bishop, and so their ordinations would be valid. (p. 9)

Forester's description reveals the secrecy that surrounded the process, as well as the dedication and sense of mission felt by those involved. While the influence of groups such as Women-church kept the vision of these women quite broad, their initial objective was clearly limited to the successful performance of a valid ordination of Catholic women.

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<sup>11</sup> "Vocational discernment" is the official period of reflection prior to entering religious life.



The group began actively seeking ordination in January of 2002 and found two bishops willing to participate in the *contra legem* act (Forster, 2008). In March of 2002, they held a private diaconate ordination, in keeping with the traditional levels of ordination in the Catholic Church. It was extremely important to those working toward the ordination of women in the Catholic Church that these ordinations be irregular *only* in the fact that women were the recipients of the sacrament. The ritual and all its other elements were otherwise in keeping with the traditions established in Canon Law. In preparation for the priestly ordination one of the supporting bishops expedited the promotion of a local priest to the rank of bishop. This was done because “one of the bishops, who was from a faraway country, asked if the priest Rafael Regelsberger could be our bishop here in Europe, and we agreed” (Forster, 2008, p. 11). This provided the women with three willing bishops as they prepared for the ordinations in June of 2002.

While the ordinations themselves occurred without incident, many of the events that surrounded this important moment in the movement read as plot twists in a Dan Brown novel. The women participating in the *contra legem* ordinations had publicized their intended action and the Vatican responded by threatening anyone who attended the event, participants, spectators, and journalists alike, with excommunication. In addition, Forester claims that Church personnel attempted to sue the rental company that had been hired for the event. While all three bishops had committed to attend the ordination, only two made an appearance at the event. The third reportedly came to Passau, “and asked a [religious] community for overnight accommodations on the day before the ordinations. During the night, his door was locked from the outside and he could not exit the room.”(Forster, 2008, p. 11). While it is not possible to verify these accounts from sources not associated with the RCWP, these descriptions provide

important insight in the level of persecution from Rome perceived by women involved in the movement.

The response of the Vatican was swift, an official warning followed by a writ of excommunication. The Vatican issued a statement clarifying that:

It is necessary above all to state precisely the case under consideration does not involve a *latae sententiae* penalty, which is incurred *ipso facto* when a delict expressly established by the law is committed. It concerns instead, a *ferendae sententiae* penalty, imposed after the guilty party has been duly warned (cf. cann. 1314; 1347 §1 CIC). (Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, 2007)<sup>12</sup>

The fact that the Vatican took the time to distinguish the penalty imposed upon the Danube Seven as *ferendae sententiae* gives some insight into how they perceived the act. It is reasonable to assume that initially the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith saw the women involved as participants in a single event, one that was not a significant threat to the larger Church community, provided it was made clear that such an act was not allowed to pass unpunished. This perspective is further supported by the fact that while individual writs of excommunication were not issued for the majority of the subsequent ordination events, the Church established the attempted ordination of women as an act which incurred a *latae sententiae* excommunication

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<sup>12</sup> Excommunication *ferendae sententiae* is a penalty per a specific act. In such a situation the penitent is generally given a warning and an opportunity to repent prior to the issuance of a writ of excommunication. Excommunication *latae sententiae* is an automatic penalty for the commission of certain acts considered by their nature contrary to the faith. A person who consciously commits such an act is considered automatically excommunicated by fiat, and no warning period is provided, nor is an official writ issued. (Holy See)

penalty in 2008. Thus the Church established the attempted ordination of a women as one of only a handful of act specifically singled out as incurring that most severe of all penalties. One other significant aspect of the excommunication decree is that the Vatican denied the validity (rather than licity) of the ordinations on the grounds that the ordaining bishop, one Romulo Antonio Braschi, was a founder of a schismatic group and had been excommunicated for schism previous to the attempted ordinations in June 2002 (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2007). This claim allowed the Vatican to deny any claim of valid sacrament to the women's actions. However, it is also important to note the only bishop named by the RCWP is Rafael Regelsberger; all others have been kept anonymous for their own protection. As there is no public account of these events there is no objective way to resolve this inconsistency.

The women of the Danube Seven publically responded to their excommunication declaring "we cannot repent being women" (Forster, 2008, p. 12). and began to recruit others. In 2003, they asked a bishop to ordain several of the women who had been made priests as bishops so that they could in turn ordain other women. This was done so that it would no longer be necessary to rely on bishops who were forced to remain anonymous to protect themselves. By 2006, the RCWP had established itself under the name Roman Catholic Womenpriests and ratified a vision statement making it unique from other specific groups such as the WOC and Women-church. The further growth and rhetoric of the RCWP is explored in the following chapter.

### *Conclusion*

The history of women in the Catholic Church is a long and difficult one. It is a story of repression and exclusion, but also of struggle and redemption. From the rights and equalities of the early Christian communities to their modern position as equal in dignity but different in

design, the role of women has always been an issue with which the Latin Church has struggled. Understanding this history is key to understanding the arguments and issues of the RCWP and the larger movement of women for greater inclusion in the practice and ministry of their faith.

### Chapter Three

#### Analysis of the Rhetoric of the Roman Catholic Womenpriest Movement

On May 29, 2008 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the policy arm of the Vatican and the Papacy, issued the following general decree:

Remaining firm on what has been established by canon 1378 of the canon Law, both he who has attempted to confer holy orders on a women, and the woman who has attempted to receive the said sacrament, incur *in latae sententiae* excommunication, reserved to the Apostolic See ... The current decree will come into immediate force from the moment of publication in the ‘*Observatore Romano*’ and is absolute and universal. (§2)

*In latae sententiae* excommunication is automatic excommunication incurred through the committing of one of a select classification of mortal sins, specifically apostasy, heresy, or schism. According to Vatican archives in the last fifty years, only three other acts have been specifically singled out as incurring such a sentence. (1) Certain acts associated with marrying outside of the church,<sup>1</sup> (2) abortion, and (3) sacrilegious treatment of the Eucharist. Thus, the Vatican took a significant and declarative stance on this issue. Given that the RCWP is the only group to have conferred ordinations on women, it is reasonable to infer that while issued as

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<sup>1</sup> “Catholics are under an excommunication *in latae sententiae* reserved to the Ordinary: (1) who contract marriage before a non-Catholic minister contrary to canon 1063, 51, 1; (2) who contract marriage with an explicit or implicit agreement that all children or any child be educated outside the Catholic Church; (3) who knowingly presume to present their children to non-Catholic ministers to be baptized; (4) who, being parents or taking their place, knowingly present their children to be educated or trained in a non-Catholic religion.” (Code of Canon Law, 1983)

general decree to the entire community of the faithful, this declaration of *in latae sententiae* excommunication was aimed at the RCWP.

In response, the RCWP published *Women Find a Way: The Movement and Stories of Roman Catholic Womenpriests*, a book of personal accounts of RCWP members which served as a defense of the group and the women priest movement. The RCWP specifically addressed the general decree from the Vatican by stating that:

Roman Catholic Womenpriests reject the penalty of excommunication issued by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on May 29, 2008 .... We are loyal members of the church who stand in prophetic tradition of holy obedience to the Spirit's call to change an unjust law that discriminates against women .... We want no 'fight.' We want balance, a more holistic image of God, renewal. We want 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 (McGrath, Meehan, & Raming, 2008, p. 2)

They present the book as a collection of testimonies from “validly ordained Roman Catholic women” (p.2) who are committed to presenting the case for a renewal of priestly ministry and who make no apologies for their actions.

An analysis of *Women Find a Way* and other texts created by the RCWP, such as their mission statement, several press releases regarding their ordination ceremonies, and several scholarly articles published by ordained members, reveals three important themes in their argument. The first theme is the tension between modernity and tradition. A balance between

fidelity to traditions and flexible response to changes in modern society is vital to the survival of any institution. The Church argues that the RCWP has sinned by violating an important tradition. However, the RCWP counter this argument by suggesting that the Church erred both by blindly following traditions which may be erroneous and by failing to make necessary adjustments to the changes in society. The second theme is a mythic appeal based in the idea that their approach matches the practice of the first Christian communities. The RCWP frames its argument around the idea that their vision for the future of the Roman Catholic Church is an accurate representation of the Church as established by Christ. They present an image of a communal Church society that closely resembles biblical descriptions of the first Christian communities and they admonish the Vatican hierarchy for valuing their position of power over compassion for people. The third theme is that the ordination of women is an issue of justice, understood from the perspective of Catholic social teaching as “respecting the transcendent dignity of man” (Vaticana, 1994, §). They argue that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is both a violation of such an understanding of justice on its own and facilitates further indignities preventing women from fully serving others in the Church and civic society, particularly those pushed to the margins and most in need.. This serves as a critical indictment against the Vatican for failing to live up to the values of the Church it represents. In this chapter, I develop each of these themes in detail, drawing from the rhetoric of the RCWP as specified in the book *Women Find a Way*. This analysis will be used in the following chapter to develop a theory of how these three themes are enacted in the RCWP’s performance of the ritual of Holy Orders.

### Tradition

A key feature in the rhetoric of the RCWP, as well as in the competing rhetoric of the Vatican, is a discussion of the tenuous balance between tradition and the pull of modernity. Later defines tradition as “a coherent cultural ‘element’ or ‘mode of thought or behavior,’ a shared set of examples used in teaching the younger generation transmitting traditions in a very specific and practical way” (Later, 2005, p. 81). Tradition is the accumulation of stories, rituals, and histories that give meaning and identity to a community. It provides necessary continuity and stability. However, within the traditions of a community a differentiation needs to be made between those which are inescapably intertwined with the enduring identity of the community and those which are subject to the sway of time and place. When a society is faced with new events which challenge existing traditions, the practice of that tradition within the society must adapt in one of three ways (Later, 2005). The tradition can be explained in a new way to account for the new circumstances, the tradition itself can be changed or adapted to account for the change in conditions, or the society must abandon the tradition.

The call for the ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church, as part of the larger women’s movement, has created just such a challenge for the Church. The Roman Catholic Church is an institution steeped in tradition. Many of the key practices of the Roman Catholic Church have endured for centuries with minimal change. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), many of these traditions can be traced to the founding of the Church in the first Century CE. This provides the Roman Catholic Church with a sense of history and stability that is enmeshed with its identity and its founding mythologies. Many of the members of the RCWP articulate that it has chosen to remain within the Roman Catholic Church because they feel so deeply connected to this tradition and history. However, the call for women’s ordination challenges a key element of this tradition, and the leadership of the Roman Catholic



Church and the RCWP are at odds as to how to respond to the challenge. The RCWP argues that the Church has erred in how these traditions are interpreted and enacted in the current age. At the crux of their argument is the claim that the Church has failed to adapt to the exigencies of modern society and falls too far on the side of blind fidelity to tradition. It is an argument that must be articulated carefully; arguing for too great a deviation from tradition would undermine the credibility of the RCWP as a Catholic movement.

In the previous chapter, I articulated the role which tradition plays in the practice of the Roman Catholic faith. According to Roman Catholic belief:

In order that the full and living Gospel might always be preserved in the Church the apostles left bishops as their successors. They gave them ‘their own position of teaching authority.’” Indeed, “the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved in a continuous line of succession until the end of time,”

This living transmission, accomplished in the Holy Spirit is called Tradition, since it is distinct from Sacred Scripture, though closely connected to it. Through Tradition, “the Church in her doctrine, life, and worship perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes. (Vaticana, 1994, §77-78)

Only those included within the line of apostolic succession have the authority to interpret such Traditions. However not all practices are considered “Tradition” and equal to Sacred Scripture, thus binding to Church practices:

Tradition is to be distinguished from the various theological, disciplinary, liturgical, or devotional traditions, born in the local churches over time. These are the particular forms, adapted to different places and times, in which the great Tradition is expressed. In the light of Tradition, these traditions can be retained, modified, or even abandoned under the guidance of the Church's magisterium. (Vaticana, 1994, §83)

The tradition of the male only priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church is one which has endured for at least a millennium, and it has become deeply connected with the identity and practice of the faith. However, the RCWP is at odds with the Church as to whether the male only rule is to be understood as a tradition, bound to a specific place and time, or a Tradition, bound inescapably to the identity of the Faith. The RCWP attempts to argue that the sacramental Tradition of Holy Orders is not dependent upon the liturgical or disciplinary practice of only ordaining men.

In its description of the role of sacraments, the Roman Catholic Church argues that:

Liturgy is constitutive element of the holy and living Tradition. For this reason no sacramental rite may be modified or manipulated at the will of the minister or the community. Even the supreme authority in the Church may not change the liturgy arbitrarily, but only in the obedience of faith and with religious respect for the mystery of the liturgy. (Vaticana, 1994, §1124-1125)

From this perspective, the rites of the Roman Catholic Church are not human constructs, but divinely ordained practices which have been conveyed through Tradition. Thus, while the

magesterium of the Church has the right to interpret tradition, it claims to have no authority to change tradition. However, the Church does claim a right to reinterpret traditions, and to adapt certain Church practices in response to the signs of the time. Simply by performing sacramental acts the RCWP is making a significant argument in terms of the proper interpretation of Church Traditions. Since the law of the Church declares that rites may not be altered in a way that is contrary to the Tradition that defines them, this action can be interpreted in only two ways. Either the current interpretations of the tradition of Holy Orders are wrong, and women should be included or, the RCWP has turned its back on the traditions and rules of the Roman Catholic Church. The RCWP argues that its actions are founded in the former position.

For example, Patricia Fresen (2008) an ordained RCWP bishop, argues that “the Sacrament of Orders is founded on baptism, not on gender” (p. 29). She acknowledges the validity of understanding the practice of apostolic succession as Tradition but asserts that “our whole understanding of apostolic succession could be considerably broadened. Apostolic succession rightly means that the tradition of laying-on of hands for community ministry comes down to us through the centuries from the time of the early Church” (Fresen, 2008, p. 29). She then challenges the way in which this tradition is practiced suggesting “it need not necessarily be limited to the laying on of hands by the bishop only” because such a tradition does not go back to the early Church and can only be traced “in its written form, to some time in during the Middle Ages” (Fresen, 2008, p. 29). She then suggests that “it could still be accepted as apostolic succession, I propose, if the community – not the bishop – were to lay hands” (Fresen, 2008, p. 29). Two important themes emerge from this argument. The first is that RCWP doctrine is not contrary to the traditions of the Church, if those traditions are properly interpreted. The second is to suggest that if the hierarchical practice of requiring a bishop to lay-on hands upon a male

recipient for Holy Orders can only be traced to the Middle Ages, then it is not an enduring Tradition and can be changed.

The RCWP also critiques the Vatican for failure to adapt to the demands of modern society. Fresen (2005) argues that “it is a pity that the official Roman Catholic Church clings largely to the values and the worldview of many centuries ago and still organizes itself as a feudal society” (n.p.). The RCWP criticizes the Roman Catholic Church for holding on to traditions and practices that are connected to power rather than to the true tenets of the faith. For example, the RCWP explains their choice to eschew many of the traditional trappings and vestments associated with the clerical caste stating that “the bishops [of the RCWP] do not wear the mitre or carry a crozier, which would make them look taller and more important than everyone else. Mitres, tiaras, and elaborate vestments were for kings and emperors and from the time of Constantine popes and prelates copied this” (Fresen, 2008, p. 32). The Church by contrast, is shown by the RCWP to embrace these traditions in order to retain their power and authority.

The RCWP also claims that the Vatican’s adherence to Tradition stifles the faith. Ordained womenpriest Andrea Johnson (2008) claims that from an examination of “the creeping triumphalism which seems to be dominating recent teachings and pronouncements from the Vatican, it is tempting to say the Holy Spirit has too little room in the Church” (p. 65). She extends this argument claiming that:

Lock-down, uniformity are the order of the day. The Spirit indeed has no room. The Spirit apparently has no voice at the center of ecclesial power. She is crowded out by priorities concerning

maintaining *unbroken traditions* and leaving nothing to “chance.”

(Johnson, 2008, p. 65)

Considering the fact that the Catechism claims that the magisterium is to be guided by the Holy Spirit regarding the preservation or change of Tradition, such an indictment is particularly damning. Johnson represents the larger argument of the RCWP stating that the Church has failed to adapt when needed and preserve those concepts that are truly sacred.

The movement also uses tradition to defend their own actions. Victoria Rue (2009), an ordained womenpriest and active academic scholar, uses the words of the Vatican to defend the actions of the RCWP:

Before he became pope, Cardinal Ratzinger wrote: “Over the Pope as the expression of the binding claim of ecclesiastical authority, there still stands one’s own conscience, which must be obeyed before all else, if necessary even against the requirement of ecclesiastical authority.” We are following our consciences as we continue our ministry. (p. 73)

This commitment to the tradition of obedience to one’s own conscience is also articulated in the RCWP’s mission statement (2004) where they claim that “Roman Catholic Womenpriests 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.” This allows the RCWP to set up the argument that its way of practicing the faith is more in keeping with tradition and the proper intentions of the faith than the practices of the official Church.

Finally, the RCWP uses tradition as a way of explaining and defending the decision to remain involved in the Roman Catholic Church rather than converting to a denomination that

might be more open to women in ministry. Gisela Forster (2008), one of the original Danube Seven and now a RCWP bishop, describes how as a youth she “had loved church, loved the singing, the music, the art, the rituals” (p. 9). Womenpriest Gabriella Velardi Ward (2008) illustrates her call and connection to the Catholic Church saying “I have heard Spirit call me from the time I was a five-year old child. Spirit showed herself to me in the darkened, incense-filled church as we chanted during Benediction . . . [and] in the mystery and symbolism of the Mass during Eucharist” (p. 68).<sup>2</sup> Both Forster and Ward present the image of a young, faithful child entranced by the rituals and traditions of her faith. For many of the women involved in RCWP those aspects of the faith that captivated them as a child remain, linking them inescapably to their faith, making the idea of joining another Church unthinkable. However, at the same time these women are frustrated with the official Church and refuse to passively accept rules they feel are unjust and contradict the tradition that keeps them connected to the Roman Catholic faith.

In this section, I have outlined a number of the ways in which the RCWP uses appeals to tradition and presents arguments regarding what they see as the correct observation of such tradition. Specifically, I have identified the critiques the RCWP levels against the Church in regard to arguments on tradition, the ways in which the RCWP uses appeals to tradition to defend their actions, and how the RCWP uses tradition as an explanation for the decision to stay in the Roman Catholic Church rather than moving to a more inclusive denomination. In the next section I explore how the RCWP takes this argument to the next level by arguing for a mythic return to the practices of the early church.

### The Myth of Return

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<sup>2</sup> Spirit here refers to the Holy Spirit, which traditionally referred to by masculine pronouns.

Closely connected to the idea of tradition, is the RCWP's argument that its model for priestly ministry more closely resembles the model established by the scriptures and the early church than that of the official Church. Considering the fact that law by Tradition is only justified by a connection to the scriptures or the early church, the RCWP's argument for a return to that model of priesthood works in two ways. First, it serves as an indictment against the hierarchical church rules. Second, it serves as an enticement to follow their model in an effort to purify the Church.

By attempting to connect their vision for the future of the church to an earlier more innocent time, the RCWP is delving into the realm of origin myth. The desire to return to the purity of one's origins, to be free of the burden of accumulated error and sin in the present day is a recurring theme in many human societies. Mircea Eliade refers to this archetypal phenomenon as the myth of eternal return. Eliade (1954) argues that from the perspective of the myth of return, "The world which surrounds us, symbolized by the hand of man, is accorded no validity beyond on that which is due to the extraterrestrial prototype, which served as its model" (p. 10). The actions, customs, and beliefs of a society are justified by their connection to an original prototype that define that society. This often references an origin time. William Doty (2000) explains that "to the extent that myths are regarded as expressing nodal points of human significance, they present unquestionable truths, which are considered nonfalsifiable so long as retelling or ritual reinforcement continues to evoke emotional participation" (p. 61). In other words, so long as a myth resonates within a community it continues to hold sway over the actions of the community, and the stronger the nodal point, the stronger the influence, and as Eliade demonstrates, origins are among the most powerful of such points.

The origin myth includes a "tendency toward purification, a nostalgia for the lost paradise." (Doty, 2000, p. 143). Further, Eliade (1968) explains that (at least for) "archaic societies' life cannot be prepared. It can only be re-created by a return to the sources" of one's origins (p. 30). Myths of return represent a strong tendency in human history, a longing for the perceived simpler, purer ways of an earlier time, unencumbered by the burden of present complications and errors. A return to one's origins is a return to safety. For individuals in societies in which myth plays a dominant role in everyday life, such as the Roman Catholic Church, "real authentic existence begins when this primordial history is communicated to him and he can accept the consequences." (Eliade, 1968, p. 92).

The RCWP does not argue for a complete return to Christian origins, but rather an "*anamnesis*, whereby the past is made present again in this time and place, [a] revivification of the early Church when women were priests, deacons, and bishops in full apostolic authority." (Reynolds, 2008, p. 41). By saying "in this time and place" the RCWP acknowledges that they must adapt to the exigence of the twenty-first century. At the foundation of the RCWP's myth of return argument is the idea that Canon 1024 is flawed. Womenpriest Andrea Johnson explains "the history of this canon has been traced not to God's will or Jesus' intent, but to culturally and time limited understandings of the basic nature of women and of men." (Johnson, 2008, p. 66). In an academic history of womenpriests in the Roman Catholic Church, Bridget Mary Meehan, Olivia Doko, and Victoria Rue (2006) argue that:

Jesus did not ordain anyone. Deacons, presbyters (elders), and bishops are not mentioned in the Gospels. Jesus had male and female disciples, who became apostles by being sent away (from



Greek *apo*, *away* and *stello*, *send*) by being told to “Go and tell.”

(n.p.)

Such arguments suggest that the tradition of a male-only priesthood, or indeed of any clerical caste, cannot be traced to foundation of the Church and is therefore open to question. Meehan et al. also connect their argument to Jesus’s creation of apostles, which is where the Church bases many of its arguments. By suggesting that Jesus is shown in canonical scripture to have sent out females on apostolic mission, Meehan et al. undermine the Church argument that the priesthood extends from the apostles and that only men were chosen for this esteemed role. In *Women Find a Way* Meehan (2008b) quotes an epistle: “In Gal: 3: 28 we read: ‘In Christ there is no Jew, or Greek, slave or citizen, male or female, all are one in Christ Jesus,’”(p. 93) in order to suggest that the Canon 1024 is contrary to one of the fundamental ideologies of the Christian faith, the equality of the baptized as expressed in scripture.

The RCWP also presents evidence from archeological finds dating back to the first centuries of the Common Era. The RCWP website shows the image of a mosaic depicting three feminine figures identified as Bishop Theodora, St Praxedis, and the Blessed Virgin Mary, all wearing episcopal crosses (Meehan et al., 2006). While the individuals depicted in the mosaic lived in the first and second century of the Common Era, the mosaic itself is dated to about 820 CE, suggesting an affirmation of the existence of women office holders in the Church for a long period. Meehan et al (2006) present numerous other examples such as a mummy tag possessed by the Louvre describing “Artemidora, a Christian living between approximately 250-350 AD. The tag describes her as a ‘presbyter,’ that is, priest”(n.p.). All of these archeological artifacts serve as evidence that if we were to return to the origins of the Catholic Church we would find women serving in roles of power similar to that of the priest.

The RCWP is seeking significant changes in the church. They seek the inclusion of women in the ordained priesthood of the current hierarchical structures of the Church first, and the dismantling of those hierarchical structures. These are separate goals that demand different strategies. In order to argue for women to be permitted to receive the sacrament of Holy orders, it is necessary to establish that women have previously been ordained, and show this precedent in the traditions of the Church. As the current understanding of Church tradition excludes women, it is necessary to show that women were originally included and their exclusion was added later. Essentially, it is necessary to establish an origin myth in which Roman Catholic Church can return to a tradition that justifies women's ordination. Fresen (2008) argues for "a return to the practice of the very early church, when there was no ordination of priests: people in the community often took turns leading the Eucharist, often depending on whose home they were meeting in" (p.32).

In this section, I have detailed how the RCWP has used a "myth of return" to justify their movement. They present two separate images, one of the biblical era in which there was no clerical offices at all and one of the early canonical movement in which women served in clerical roles. Each of these images of the past serves a key purpose. The description of women serving in clerical roles justifies the current actions of the RCWP, specifically the ordaining of women and opening of house churches presided over by womenpriests. The biblical arguments provide a foundation for the long-term goals of the RCWP and also serve to refute papal arguments about the primacy of the pastoral role and clerical hierarchy. In the next section, I explore how the RCWP frames arguments in terms of the cardinal virtue of justice.

### Justice

At the core of the RCWP's mission is an argument regarding justice. In the Roman Catholic tradition justice, along with prudence, fortitude, and temperance, are understood as the cardinal virtues from which all other virtues extend (Vaticana, 1994, §1805). Specifically, justice is defined as:

The moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor... Justice toward men disposes one to respect the rights of each and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity with regard to persons and the common good. (Vaticana, 1994, §1807)

The virtues commonly associated with good Christian behavior such as kindness, charity, generosity, patience, gentleness, and modesty are presented as the fruits of the cardinal virtue of justice. From this perspective, to behave in a just manner is to behave in a manner in keeping with the faith, and to behave in an unjust manner is to be in sin. The RCWP connects its actions and missions to this cardinal virtue asserting that “ordination has to do with justice; it has do with reform; it has to do with solidarity and freedom and world community” (McGrath, 2008, p.110). The RCWP goes further, impugning the virtue of the official Church, claiming that “the Church was guilty of the sin of discrimination against women and blaming God for it, and indeed, continues to do so to this day” (Houk, 2008, p. 101). At the crux of these arguments is the proposition that the RCWP is acting in pursuit of justice and the Church is not, and therefore the position, and actions, of the RCWP is more correct than the position of the Church.

The RCWP presents itself in its mission statement (2004) as a movement that is “at the forefront of a model of service that offers Catholics a renewed priestly ministry in vibrant grassroots communities where all are equal and all are welcome.” (n.p.). The theme of all being

welcome is central to the arguments of the RCWP. Many of the stories told in *Women Find a Way* describe being young and confused by the exclusion of women from ministry. Womenpriest Eileen McCafferty DiFranco (2008) relates this story: “at ten, I was infuriated when I learned only boys could be altar boys, especially since I was smarter than the lot of them. Who made this stuff up?” (p.56). The answer given was “always ‘just because,’ or God said so” (p. 57).

Womenpriest Kathy Sullivan Vandenberg (2008) describes sitting in a theology class at a seminary college and asking “if a priest does not have to be holy to be ordained why is the gender of the person wanting to be ordained important?” (p. 122) and receiving as an answer that she was not to ask questions in class but instead “write down any questions before class and give them to [the instructor]” (p. 123). Added to this insulting refusal to answer was the fact that “the young men were never held to that standard.” (Vandenberg, 2008, p. 123). Such stories illustrate both the inequality experienced by women in the Roman Catholic Church, and also the lack of solid justification provided for this inequality. The argument “God says so” is particularly weak considering no one, not even the Pope, may simply declare to know the will of God without providing some evidence to demonstrate how one has discerned such knowledge.

Fresen (2005) suggests that cognitive dissonance exists when an institution dedicated to the sacred dignity of all wraps itself in traditions that are oppressive. She expands this argument with a comparison between the RCWP and past efforts against apartheid in her native South Africa. Explaining that “both racism and sexism attempt to give all the power and privilege to one group of people to the exclusion of the other group. Both racism and sexism are horrendous systems of injustice” (n.p.). Fresen (2005) concludes that “Once one becomes aware of the injustices within these systems one cannot go back” (n.p.). She then connects the broad concept of sexism and injustice to the specific issues of the RCWP mission, claiming “we in the Church

are on another ‘long walk to freedom,’ this time freedom from sexism, from unjust discrimination against women in the church, freedom from oppression by the privileged clerical class” (Fresen, 2005, n.p.). While some might criticize the RCWP for buying into the church hierarchy by ordaining women as priests and bishops, using the same structures and offices, Fresen claims this is not the case. Rather she suggests to her audience that “we need to stand together in protest, to break unjust laws because we cannot wait forever, and we need ... to move into the structures that exist and change them.” (Fresen, 2005, n.p.). Thus, establishing the idea that even participating in the hierarchical structures they hope to change is an act of justice because it creates greater inclusion.

While opening the office of the priesthood to women is in itself an act of justice, the RCWP also argues that ordaining women facilitates other acts of justice. The RCWP argues that their ordained members are able to serve those communities the Church is unable or unwilling to serve, which in turn criticizes the official church for its failure to live up to its mission of compassion. Fresen (2008) opens this argument by connecting the current priest shortage to the issue of justice saying that “for the ‘official’ church, the need to enforce a rigid model of priesthood, and to insist it is reserved to celibate males, is more important than the right of communities to celebrate the Eucharist”(p. 28). Implied in this argument is that the priest shortage in the Roman Catholic Church is not a result of a lack of willing individuals but too stringent rules about who can be considered eligible for the role.

A lack of priests to serve at established parishes is only the tip of an enormous iceberg of injustice. Womenpriest Judith A.B. Lee (2008) describes her ministry to the homeless in Ft. Meyers, Florida, arguing that sacramental ministry to the poor and outcast is an important and

often ignored ministry. She also connects her own oppression as a woman in the Catholic Church to oppression of these “undesirables”:

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. We are also consenting to the oppression of all our sisters and brothers in poverty. (p. 84)

Lee suggests that accepting the limitations imposed by the Church on who may receive Holy Orders, and therefore on who may administer other sacraments, has far reaching consequences for the entire Catholic community. Lee’s argument also highlights why her ordination was necessary. She felt called to administer sacramental ministry to the poor and forgotten in accordance with the charge of Christ, but she could not provide that ministry until she was granted a sacramental rite herself.

Womenpriest Marie Bouclin (2008) presents another group for whom the denial of Holy Orders to women creates injustice, women victims of clergy abuse. Bouclin (2008) argues first that there is “some relationship between the Church’s exclusion of women from Holy Orders (and full equality within the Body of Christ) and the impunity with which men could abuse their priestly power”(p. 49). In other words, because women are placed in a secondary position in the Church there is greater risk for abuse. Bouclin cites two reasons for this. One is that the priests themselves feel untouchable and imbued with special rights; the other is the “women are taught that priests speak for God and act for God,” thus making them less likely to protest unwanted advances or report them until after the damage to their psychological and spiritual selves is already done. Bouclin argues that current victims need clergy who can minister to them and relate to them in order to help them heal and regain their faith, and that such ministers ought to

be women. She also argues that to prevent such abuse in the future women needed to be allowed full inclusion in all sacraments of the Catholic faith.

In this section, I have outlined the ways in which appeals to justice play a critical role in the arguments of the RCWP. I have illustrated how the RCWP challenges the just virtue of the Church by arguing that the exclusion of women is contrary to the mission of the Church. In addition, the RCWP argues that such an exclusion leads to further injustices, and therefore make it possible for the Church to be guilty of additional sins against the people it is charged with serving.

### *Conclusion*

The RCWP movement is a focused collective of individuals working toward specific goals. Their arguments focus on a few select themes. Key among these themes is the issue of tradition, the need for a mythic return in the practice of the early Church, and the issue of justice. In this chapter, I have shown that the role of tradition in the Catholic Church is vital to the rules regarding the exclusion of women from Holy Orders. The RCWP presents arguments to demonstrate that the Church's interpretation of this tradition is flawed and states that the church is too committed to adhering to its traditions, regardless of information that would call those traditions into question. Closely connected to the issue of tradition is the role of the myth of return. Because tradition guides what is and is not acceptable and enduring in the practice of the Catholic faith, the RCWP frames a number of their arguments around returning to the practice of the earliest church communities. This claim allows the RCWP to dispute the current hierarchical structures of the institutional Church and to suggest that their exclusion was not a part of the original plan. Finally, the RCWP uses justice as a principle theme. Relying on the definition of justice as the cardinal virtue which guides all others, the RCWP presents the case that exclusion

of women from the priesthood is both in itself an injustice, but also a rule which unduly burdens the faithful and facilitates subsequent injustices. This is made a greater sin by the fact that the Church is charged with creating a more just world. Thus, the RCWP levels an indictment against the Church suggesting that it has failed in its mission, and argues that the RCWP, whom the official church has excommunicated, is doing a better job of living out that mission.



## **Chapter Four:**

### **Ritual as Argument in the Roman Catholic Womenpriest Movement:**

In the previous chapter, I discussed the three key themes that are presented in the RCWP's arguments for the ordination of women. Tradition, origin mythos, and justice all play an important role in the argumentative efforts of the RCWP. However, these themes can be seen in most if not all, religious renewal movements. What separates the RCWP from many of these other movements is the way in which they have used the sacred rituals of the Roman Catholic Church to enact the themes.

In this chapter, I argue that the RCWP uses ritual not only to enact the larger themes of their central argument, but as an argument in and of itself. By performing the sacred sacramental rituals of the Roman Catholic Church, and asserting the validity of those ritual acts, the RCWP is making a case to the Vatican that is far harder to ignore than would be other rhetorical acts. The fact that there have been several movements for the ordination that preceded the RCWP, none of which have garnered so virulent a reaction from Rome as the RCWP, gives credence to the fact that the Vatican has taken the RCWP quite seriously. The key feature that distinguishes the RCWP from these other movements is the use of illicit ordination and refusal to accept excommunication. This is truly a case where actions speak louder than words.

In order to argue that rituals function as arguments and that the key argumentative themes of the RCWP's rhetoric are enacted in the performance of ritual by the RCWP, I first provide a detailed definition of ritual. I then explain the importance of ritual in the Roman Catholic sacramental tradition. Specifically, I describe how ritual fits into the Roman Catholic faith and how sacrament may be considered one of the key defining features of the Roman Catholic Church. Next, I explore how the RCWP has used ritual by illustrating how each of the key

themes of the rhetorical arguments is enacted in the performance of ritual. Having shown how RCWP's rhetorical themes play out in ritual, I then show how the use of ritual enacts their larger rhetorical vision. Finally, I describe a view of ritual as argument.

### *Defining Ritual*

As was made clear in the discussion of foundational myths and myth of return in the previous chapter this study takes a somewhat narrow, functionalist perspective of myth. In this section, I briefly account for the various definitions of myth. I then present a detailed account of a functionalist perspective of myth. Such a perspective is supported by scholarship and facilitates a proper understanding of the relationship of myth to ritual. Further, it emphasizes the important functionality of ritual more effectively than a broader narrative perspective ( see for example: (Campbell, 1973, 1985, 1991, 1993; Doty, 2000; Eliade, 1954, 1968; Frye, 2000).

There is no doubt that myths are a powerful rhetorical form. Joseph Campbell (1991) describes myths as the “experience of *life*” (p.5). Northrop Frye (2000) says a myth is “a story about a god” (p. 33). Bronislaw Malinowski calls myths “a reality lived” (in Rowland, 1990, p. 102). Mircea Eliade (1968) argues that “myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence” (p. 29). Henry A. Murray, cited in William Doty's (2000) comprehensive work, *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals*, defines myth as “the instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experience intelligible to ourselves. A myth is a large controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life” (p. 29). While scholars such as Doty and Frye acknowledge that myths may be seen as fictional, for the most part myths are seen as the truest of true stories. Broadly speaking, myths are those stories, which are seen as true, and which deal with sacred characters acting within a sacred time and place (Eliade, 1954, 1968; Rowland, 1990). Myths are more than just resonant narratives.

They are stories that give meaning and structure to the lives of people living within a social system.

Understanding myth as narratives dealing with sacred subject matter is a strong starting place, but this definition does not fully encapsulate a functionalist understanding of myth necessary to comprehend their relationship to ritual and their importance in institutions such as the Roman Catholic Church. Functionally, myths are those narratives that work on various levels to give meaning, structure, and direction to human life and human culture. Campbell (2002) goes so far as to suggest that myths function on biological level, arguing that “[a human being] is congenitally dependent upon society and society, commensurably, is both oriented and derived from the distinctive psychosomatic structure of man” (p. 35). In other words, humans are instinctually drawn to the structures of society, and those structures, in turn, are created by the creative intellect of man. For Campbell this creative intellect leads naturally to mythic systems. This perspective is further supported by the concept of universal archetypes, “tendencies toward expression that are ingrained in the psyche” (Rushing & Frenz, 1991, p. 389). While such archetypes explain the universal existence of myths across time and culture, they do not provide a clear understanding of the function myths serve.

The most important function of myths is to provide meaning to human existence. Robert Rowland (1990) argues this is an overarching theme of mythic function, claiming that myths function largely by “answering human problems that cannot be answered discursively” (p. 102). Campbell (1991) describes myths as “the world’s dreams. They are archetypal dreams and deal with great human problems” (p. 19). Myths do not explain all aspects of society and human life, but only those very important aspects that defy logical explanation. Claude Levi-Straus (1979) argues that myths give “man, very importantly, the illusion he can understand the universe and

that he *does* understand the universe” (p. 17). Levi-Strauss also argues that in modern society science has taken the place of mythology in serving this function. This shows that when phenomenon are able to be explained and understood discursively in a way that resonates with a society, the myth which previously explained the phenomenon loses its resonance. This should not be seen as suggesting that myths are in anyway false. Eliade (1968) states quite simply that “myth’ means a ‘true story” (p. 1). Instead, it suggests that myths are subject to changes in society and human understanding and that a myth that no longer functions to provide explanation may not survive.

Many myths continue to survive because they give identity to members of a society (Campbell, 1991). Doty (2000) explains how myths “accomplish socially integrative functions, overcoming threats toward disintegration of the social order and strengthening social bonds through communal rites, rituals, and myth telling” (p. 35). In one sense, myths function in society to explain to each member “how and why he was constituted in this particular way” (Eliade, 1968, p. 92). Myths provide a history for a people, giving reason for the roles, rules, and practices of a society. However, simply the sharing of such stories also serves to unite a people.

Overall, myths should be understood as stories that represent transcendent truths for a particular culture. These narratives are not secular histories but sacred accounts dealing with heroes operating in end and beginning times and sacred places.

### Rituals

In this section I briefly explore the definition of rituals, the relationship of ritual to myth, and the power of ritual action in community. Rituals are “the form through which one participates in a myth, partakes of it, gives oneself to it,” and the lifeblood of mythic systems (Campbell, 2002, p. 92). They are the “objects or acts [which] acquire a value, and in so doing

become real, after one fashion or another, in a reality that transcends them” (Eliade, 1954, p. 3-4).

Ritual critic Ronald Grimes (1990) argues that “any action can be ritualized, though not every action is a ritual” (p. 13). Grimes (1990) provides an exhaustive list of those characteristics required for an action to qualify as a ritual. Actions must: 1) be *performed*, that is they must constitute a gestural action; they are not merely thought or said. 2) Rituals are *stylized*; they are formal actions that deviate from the ordinary. 3) They are *repeated* at regular intervals. 4) Rituals are *social* actions that are conducted in public. While restrictions may be placed on the audience, rituals are not individual private activities. 5) Such actions are *standardized*. There is a set procedure for how a ritual is to be conducted which has developed and been solidified over time, 6) Rituals have primordial roots. They are *traditional* rather than invented. 7) Rituals are *meaning-laden* actions that are valued within society. 8) Rituals are *multifaceted*; they are complex actions that require interpretation. 9) In addition, rituals are always *symbolic*; the meaning of the action is not apparent in the surface level gestures. 10) Because they have developed over time and become standardized, rituals may be said to be perfected, idealized action that are not subject to criticism. 11) Rituals are *dramatic* and play-like. 12) These actions are *paradigmatic* and serve to model other behaviors. 13) Rituals deal with the mystical, the *cosmic*, and the transcendent. 14. They are functional actions which serve a real purpose for a society. 15) Finally, rituals are deliberative conscious actions.<sup>1</sup> From this list, one can distill three key characteristics. First ritual is action, specifically a stylized act that is performed deliberately by a community, on repeated occasions, and that performance is a perfected drama meant to be emblematic of an ideal action set in the mythos of the community. Second, the ritual is a social

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<sup>1</sup> An inclusive table with these terms as well several synonyms is included on page 14 of Grimes’ book.

action, which is performed in specified communal setting to ensure specified results in the community's life. Third, the meaning of a ritual goes beyond the specific action of the ritual and connects the community with the sacred, their history, and the like providing an understanding of the action.

Rituals achieve these ends in part from their "intricate interdependence ... [with] myth (which is so often one form of ideology)" (Kluckhohn, 1942, p. 54). Further, "their meaning and their value are not connected with the crude physical datum but with the property of reproducing a primordial act, of repeating a mythic example" (Eliade, 1954, p. 4). Campbell (1991) defines this relationship saying "ritual is the enactment of myth. By participating in a ritual, you are participating in a myth" (p. 103). However, it is important to note that the myth is not always primary to the ritual. Kluckhohn (1942) notes many instances in which an action that evolved first and the mythic explanation followed. In addition, there are numerous examples in which the ritual is the only means of truly accessing the truth within the mythic story. The sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church are a good example of this relationship. One can read the bible, and learn the story of Christ but until an individual partakes of the ritual it can be said that they do not know Christ (Kluckhohn, 1942; Vaticana, 1994).

One key function of ritual is that it provides a way of "knowing" the mythic truth. Rituals exist in the secular present but operate within the realm of sacred times and places. Eliade (1954) describes this relationship:

Through repetition of the cosmogenic act, concrete time, in which the construction takes place, is projected into mythical time, *in illo tempore* when the foundations of the world occurred. Thus the reality and the enduringness of a construction are assured not only

by the transformation of profane space into a transcendent space (the center) but also by the transformation of concrete time into mythic time. Any ritual whatever, as we shall see later, unfolds not only in a consecrated space (i.e. 'one different in essence from profane space) but also in a 'sacred time,' 'once upon a time (*in illo tempore, ab origine*), that is when the ritual was first performed by a god, ancestor, or hero. (p. 20-21)

Thus, rituals are not merely a play-acting of a mythic story, but are those actions which truly bring the myth into actuality. Through ritual, myths exist both within the sacred time of the myth but also within concrete time, allowing those participating in the myth to transcend into a sacred reality.

The connection of rituals to sacred reality, the fact that they are seen to bring such reality into being, requires that they are carefully regulated and guarded. It is for this reason that rituals are almost always performed by spiritual leaders such as a priest or shaman and rarely be performed by the uninitiated. Further, rituals demand specific circumstances. Only the sanctioned materials, locations, and even words may be used for a ritual to be valid. Failure to comply has consequences ranging from simply the invalidation and failure of the ritual act to bringing damnation to the entire community.

With the wellbeing of the community contingent upon the performance of ritual, rituals often became linked to social norms. Suzanne Langer (1976) explains that "a rite regularly performed is the constant reiteration of sentiments toward 'first and last things'; it is not a free expression of emotions, but a disciplined rehearsal of 'right attitudes'" (p. 153). William Dinges (1987) also explores the idea of "right attitude" conveyed by myth explaining that "ritual is

approached as a formalized context in which social codes and relationships (identity, role, status, power, authority) are condensed, symbolized, dramatized, linked with transcendent meaning, emotionally charged, repetitively reinforced and ‘stated in nonverbal interactions’ (p. 140). In other words, rituals help us to know where we fit in the community and what we are expected to do as a member of a community which shares a sacred reality. To be excluded from a ritual is to be excluded from the sacred. Based on the rituals and one's participation in them, a member of a community can discern what truths are available and what truths are forbidden.<sup>2</sup> Especially in modern society, it is very difficult to exclude people from a mythic story. However, it remains quite easy to exclude people from the ritual performance. In essence, rituals can become the gates of sacred reality for a community. This exclusion makes excommunication “the most severe ecclesiastical penalty” in the Roman Catholic Church (Vaticana, 1994, §1463).

Finally, one must understand that rituals are not static. Rituals exist to bring mythic reality into profane reality, to repair the brokenness of the world. “Ritual always operates in a world that is fragmented and fractured... The world always returns to its broken state, constantly requiring the repairs of a ritual” (Seligman, p. 27). However, the ritual required does not always remain the same. As the needs of society change and the salience of particular myths ebb, the role of rituals changes as well. What once was forbidden, such as the inclusion of women in a particular ritual, becomes the new norm. Such shifts are not easy, and are often met with resistance and fracture of communities, but such shifts are also unavoidable part of the lifecycle of myth and ritual. It is in this turbulent place of shifting ritual salience that the RCWP is attempting to act.

*Sacrament and Ritual in the Roman Catholic Church*

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Eliade (1958) explores how women are excluded from the initiation rituals of young men in certain African tribes because there are certain truths that are only for the men.



The Roman Catholic Church is firmly based in a sacramental tradition. The Church sees the sacraments, the central rituals involved in the practice of the faith, as the sole source for the “‘powers that come forth’ from the Body of Christ which is ever-living and life-giving” (Vaticana, 1994, § 1116). Catholics of the Roman order believe that by receiving the sacraments they receive the grace of God necessary for salvation. Additionally, sacraments have an indelible quality -- they are seen as leaving a permanent mark on the souls of the faithful – and once administered they cannot be revoked (McGuire, 1953; (Vaticana, 1994). William Countryman (1992) describes a sacramental act as one that “replicates, with physical means, important realities of the life of faith” (p. 43). Countryman (1992) furthers this argument saying, “Christian sacraments, like the word of the gospel, communicate grace—the good news of God’s unconditional forgiveness” (p. 43). Albert Schlitzer (1954) explains that “the Church carries out her work of energizing men with divine life *principally* through the sacraments. The Church would wither and die without the sacraments” (p. 398). What this means is the Roman Catholic Church sees its identity more closely tied to the practice of the sacraments than to beliefs in the faith alone.

Sacrament is at the heart of the identity and mission of the Roman Catholic Church. The Catechism describes the mission of the Church in relation to sacrament saying:

The Church’s mission is not an addition to that of Christ and the Holy Spirit, but is its sacrament: in her whole being and in all her members, the Church is sent to announce, bear witness, make

present, and spread the mystery of the communion of the Holy Trinity. (Vaticana, 1994, § 738)<sup>3</sup>

The Catechism further describes this identity asserting that “The Church, in Christ, is like a sacrament – a sign and instrument’...The Church’s first purpose is to be the sacrament of the *inner union of men with God*” (Vaticana, 1994, § 1113). Still further, “The whole liturgical life of the Church revolves around the Eucharistic sacrifice and the sacraments” (Vaticana, 1994, § 1113).

The sacraments envelop the identity of the Roman Catholic Church on multiple levels. “The sacraments are ‘of the Church’ in the double sense that they are ‘by her’ and ‘for her’” (Vaticana, 1994, §1118). They are “by the Church” in that the sacraments are action performed by Church, Because of the central role of sacraments in the practice of the faith, the Church has strict rules regarding what qualifies as a sacrament, who may receive a sacrament, how a sacrament must be performed, and who may perform such a sacrament (Johnson, 2005). To violate such rules, as the RCWP has done, is seen as a grave affront not only to the institution of the Church but also to the faith itself.

The sins of the RCWP are made more significant by a unique characteristic of Holy Orders as one of the sacraments of initiation, which:

Confer, in addition to grace, a sacramental *character* or ‘seal by which the Christian shares in Christ’s priesthood and is made a member of the Church according to different states and functions. This configuration to Christ and to the Church, brought about by the Spirit, is indelible; it remains forever in the Christian as a

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<sup>3</sup> (Vaticana, 1994)§738 It is the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church to refer to itself using feminine pronouns. It comes from the concept of “mother church”.

positive disposition of grace, a promise and guarantee of divine protection. (Vaticana, 1994, § 1121)

Thus, once a Christian receives the sacrament of Holy Orders he is forever marked as a priest. Once the rite is received, it can never be repeated, or repealed. The punishments of excommunication and defrocking do not “undo” the ritual change, or remove the sacred identity conferred by the rite. They only bar an individual from participating in or leading the rituals of the community. Given the fact that for the Roman Catholic Church, communal sacramental participation is *the* experience of faith, such a punishment is indeed severe. This is significant because the RCWP can argue that since they have received the sacrament of Holy Orders, albeit in an irregular fashion, they have received the grace conferred by that Sacrament and are therefore ministerial priests.

The final significant element to be understood about the relationship of the Roman Catholic Church and sacramental practice is to understand the role the priest plays in such practices. A priest “guarantees it is really Christ who acts in the sacraments through the Holy Spirit for the Church...The sacramental priesthood is the sacramental bond that ties liturgical action to what the apostles said and did...[and to the] actions of Christ” (Vaticana, 1994, § 1120). In other words, the priest performs the sacramental rituals of the Church embodying Christ, through whom the miracles of the sacraments actually occur.

#### *Enacting Arguments through Rituals*

In the previous chapter, I outlined a definition of tradition and explained how arguments which rely on tradition, have played a dominant role in the debate on the ordination of women, both for the RCWP and for the larger movement for the advancement of women in the Roman Catholic Church. The RCWP has gone one step beyond the discursive position that ordaining

women is in keeping with the enduring Tradition of the Catholic Church rather than anathema to it. In this section, I examine the way in which the RCWP's actions enact their arguments regarding Tradition.

Many in the RCWP were attracted to the Roman Catholic Church because of its long tradition of sacramental identity. Iris Müller (2008) explains how she “converted to the Roman Catholic Church – a church [she] found expressed its following of Christ not just in words but in full sacramental reality, a community of faith that truly spanned the whole world” (p. 19). For others the connection to the tradition and ritual has encouraged them to stay connected to the Roman Catholic Church rather than converting to a denomination that is more open to women in ministry. This connection to tradition enhances the commitment of RCWP members to remaining respectful of the role tradition plays while simultaneously challenging the interpretation of those traditions in the practices of the modern Church.

The first way in which the RCWP enacts arguments regarding tradition is to show their respect for tradition by performing the rite of Holy Orders using the established tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, with the important variation, that they confer the right on women. Gisela Foster (2008) outlines the process the RCWP went through deciding to go through with illicit ordinations and the importance that “they would be ordained by a valid male bishop ...so their ordinations would also be valid” (p. 9). This decision is presented as being motivated by a profound love and respect for the Church and the enduring tradition of apostolic succession rather than simply a politically motivated action to keep it legal. Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger (2008) defends her choice to receive ordination *contra legem* saying “even though the ordination was not allowed within the scope of the church law, it was valid according to the intentions of the ordaining bishops and the ordinands and the rite prescribed” (p. 17). These women defend

their decision by connecting it to the tradition of apostolic succession which guides the rules for the sacrament of Holy Orders.

At the same time, it is not entirely necessary that they defend their actions in order for their actions to demonstrate a commitment to the traditions which guide and define the sacrament. Simply by making the choice to receive the sacrament according to the established ritual, and participating in the enduring tradition of apostolic succession they affirm their commitment to that tradition. Further, by performing these rites within a communal setting they are further affirmed by the participation of the community, a vital element of ritual enactment. Patricia Fresen (2008) goes so far as to suggest that the role of the community outweighs the role of the bishop saying that “apostolic succession rightly means that the *tradition* of laying on of hands for community ministry comes down to us through the centuries from the time of the early Church, and in fact goes back even beyond that... It could still be accepted as apostolic succession, [she] propose[s], if the community – not the bishop – were to lay on hands” (p. 29).

The position of Fresen highlights the second way in which the actions of the RCWP enact its position on tradition, that of a challenge to the tradition as currently interpreted. In other words, simply by performing the sacraments, and affirming them as valid ritual acts, the RCWP is enacting their position that the current interpretation that ordaining women is contrary to the enduring tradition of the Roman Catholic Church is wrong.

Simply by ordaining women the RCWP is making a profound argument that they believe it is fitting to allow women into ordained life. Discursively, the RCWP has argued that there is evidence that women were previously accepted into the line of apostolic succession. By actually ordaining women using the rituals of apostolic succession, they affirm this position. It is noteworthy that they do not alter the sacrament given to women versus that given to men. Using

the traditional sacrament of Holy Orders, the RCWP presents its position that women can receive this sacrament and that it is not contrary to tradition to do so. Were they to alter the ritual it could be argued that they see their ordination as separate from the traditional sacrament, thereby negating its validity.

The way in which the RCWP enacts the rituals of the Catholic Church also challenges the current interpretation of tradition that guides these rituals. Fresen (2008) explains how the RCWP has made slight changes to the vestments worn during the Mass and other sacraments in order to present their argument that priests should not be above the laity. For example she says that “the bishop [of the RCWP] do not wear miters, which would make them look taller and more important than everybody else” (p. 32). The RCWP does wear priestly vestments, and they do follow the traditional distinctions between deacon, priest, and bishop. The difference is they choose to do so as simply as possible, attempting through their behavior to affirm their position that traditionally the clergy were servants of the people, not revered rulers.

In chapter three, I provided a detailed explanation about what is meant by a myth of return or a return to foundations. I defined arguments which rely on this element as those which appeal to the origins of the Church and seek to connect the actions and arguments of the RCWP with the foundations of the religion. Such arguments suggest that the closer an action, or ritual, is to the original the more pure and appropriate it is. Such arguments are closely related to those which argue from the standpoint of tradition but they differ in a few important ways. Sacred Tradition is a part of Catholic theology which is used to ensure a continuous fidelity to specific rituals and dogma by the Church. Appeals to tradition draw on this theology and are generally connected to the rules and mores that define *how things are done*. In contrast, appeals to origins look back at the records and argue that there is some discrepancy in how things are done and

how they were done originally. The point is to argue for a purification of the institution and a return to foundations, rather than a reliance on interpretations of Tradition, which may be corrupted. In this section, I evaluate how the RCWP's ritual actions enact their arguments regarding a return to the practices, policies, and structure of the early Church. Given the nature of their arguments and actions, I look at how the group enacts their argument in two separate sacramental rituals, those of Holy Orders and those of the celebration of the Eucharist.

The ordination ritual relies on the tradition of apostolic succession, the laying on of hands by those who came before in order to ensure a continuous line of those chosen to lead from Christ and his apostles to modern clergy. While this ritual connects the RCWP to tradition, it also serves as a connection to the origins of the faith. The argument of the RCWP is that in the early Church bishops selected those individuals who were deemed most worthy to lead the community and would signify their choice by the laying on of hands. There was no criterion beyond baptism and a good heart. The focus on the promise of baptism and the idea that 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" (Bible, NRSV, *Gal 3:28*).

The RCWP presents the ordination ceremony as simpler than, and closer to, the original than the modern rite. The biblical description of the first laying on of hands by the apostles only indicates that "seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom," were selected to serve the community and that "they had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them" (Bible, NRSV, *Acts 6:3,6*). In the same way, the RCWP uses a simple service in which they are ordained by simple prayer and the laying on of hands. The RCWP leaves out the traditional swearing fidelity to the ordaining bishop and the Pope, in keeping with

the biblical tradition that “priests became obedient to the faith” (Bible, NRSV, *Acts* 6:7), not the leadership of the earthly community.

The ritual behavior of those who are ordained by the RCWP is seen as more in keeping with the intentions of the foundations of the faith than is traditional Catholicism. Fresen (2008) describes difference between the RCWP and the institutional Church, claiming that “those in charge usually do not want to hear what the prophets say, because it means giving up their positions of privilege and power” (p. 32). In contrast, the priests of the RCWP have gone so far to reject titles. Fresen explains that: “we have no equivalent to ‘Father’ once we are ordained. We do not wish to refer to ourselves or anyone else as ‘Reverend.’ We do not think we are to be more revered because of ordination” (Fresen, 2008, p. 32). The idea here is to *behave* in such a way that asserts the position that the founding concept of the Church, that all are equal in Christ, must be lived and extend to all aspects of the faith.

The simplified ordination and removal of clerical privilege also enacts a final element of the RCWP’s argument regarding a return to foundations, the primacy of the priesthood of the baptized. A key concept of the early Church was that baptism made one “a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek,” (Bible, NRSV, *Hebrews*, 7:17) and that this priesthood was superior to the existing Levitical priesthood, the institutional priesthood of the Hebrew people. The RCWP symbolizes the primacy of the priesthood of the baptized by allowing all those who attend their services to wear a stole, a garment which traditionally was a mark of the priestly caste. By favoring this interpretation, the RCWP rejects the ritual role of the priest in favor of a role of service. This puts them in sharp contrast with the modern institutional Church which sees a clear distinction between the priesthood of the baptized and the ministerial priesthood.



Traditionally, the Eucharist, the sacramental transubstantiation of the bread and wine to the Body and Blood, is performed by a member of the clergy. The Eucharist is presented as the sacrifice of Christ's Passover. Therefore, only a priest, who represents Christ, may perform the rite (Vaticana, 1994). However, as the RCWP is careful to point out, in the Early Church it was not necessary that a member of the ministerial priesthood conduct the Eucharistic meal. The RCWP chooses to see the Eucharist as a *communal* sacrifice, and performs it as a *communal* action. Bridget Mary Meehan (2008a) describes how in her 'house church' "they read, shared in the dialogue homily, and prayed the words of the consecration together" (p. 93). This was particularly moving because "This was the way early Christians celebrated the Lord's Supper, during the time of the Acts of the Apostles, and for the first 200 to 300 years, before we became encumbered with big buildings"(Meehan, 2008a, p. 93). Her argument is strengthened by the ritual enactment as it demonstrates a commitment to a return to the ways of the early Church and the intentions of the Apostles. Not only is the Eucharist celebrated in a communal manner, it is also celebrated in a domestic setting, with most of the RCWP services occurring in the homes of community members. This practice mirrors the fact that "in the early church, the Christian communities met for worship and prayer in homes and that, most likely, women presided at the Eucharist" (Meehan, 2008, p.45).

The significance of these acts is bound in the fact that "the Eucharist is 'the source and summit of Christian life.' 'The other sacraments and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it'" (Vaticana, 1994, § 1324). In other words, "the Eucharist is the sum and the summary of [the Roman Catholic] faith" (Vaticana, 1994, §1327). The history of the Church is full of stories and legends of those who defiled the Blessed Sacrament and received swift punishment from the divine. By

rejecting their excommunication, and continuing not only to participate in, but also to preside over the Eucharistic liturgy, the RCWP is making a powerful claim about the legitimacy of their position.

Justice, one of the Cardinal Virtues, one which guides all other virtuous behavior toward others, is a vital pillar of Roman Catholic life. In the previous chapter, I outlined a definition of this attribute and its significance to the arguments and positions of the RCWP. In this section, I provide an analysis of how their ritual actions serve to enact their position.

According to Ida Raming (2008) “more than half the members of the Roman Catholic Church are women; yet the public appearance of this church is that of a man’s church” (p. 21). Raming (2008) describes how “women belong, per se, to subordinated lay people who are obliged to obey the ‘sacred Pastors” (p. 22). In other words, by virtue of their sex, and in violation of the belief that all humans are equal creations, made in the image of God, women have been forced into the role of a permanent spectator of Roman Catholic ritual. For the RCWP this oppression is contrary to the spirit of Justice which calls all Christians (and, more specifically, all Roman Catholics) to see their fellow human beings as created in the image of God. It was not enough for the RCWP simply *to say* that such oppression was wrong, they needed to act. By ordaining womenpriests, the RCWP follows the call of “prophetic obedience...taking a stand for justice in the face of injustice or discrimination” (Mission Statement of RCWP, 210). Raming (2008) describes the initial ordinations as such an act in which:

Regarding this hopeless situation, in 2002, seven women started to follow their spiritual calling: they decided to be ordained *contra legem* (c. 1024). This was a public prophetic sign making evident

that spiritual callings to ordained ministry cannot forever be suppressed by a law imposed by men on women. (p. 25)

The goal of such behavior is not simply a confrontational act to say “we can do it,” but an act supporting an “inclusive, women-friendly tradition and practice [which could]... change the patriarchal structure and behavior of the ‘official’ church” (Raming, 2008, p. 25).

By taking the step of actually receiving the sacrament of Holy Orders and of then performing the rites restricted to the priestly caste, the RCWP essentially says that the stakes are too high to wait for the official Church to catch up with them. Their fidelity to the rite connects them to the traditions of the faith and to the idea of the Roman Catholic Church as an enduring community. For the RCWP, this *contra legem* life takes on a mantle of sacred calling, Eileen McCafferty DiFranco (2008) describes how “God...needed people to remain on the outside of the institutions – even to the point of excommunication – in order to hold institutions accountable to their mission” (p. 61). By performing sacramental rites, the RCWP is doing just that, they are attempting to call the official Church to account and make them aware of the many ways in which they are failing to serve their people.

By receiving the sacrament of Holy Orders, and then serving the ministerial role of the priest, members of RCWP are essentially saying, we did this without the Vatican, because the official Church was not showing us mercy or leading us to grace. Therefore, we do not need them. Further, the RCWP claims that they are “obeying God and not man,” thereby suggesting a belief in a divine sanction for their actions. (Boucin, 2008, p. 52).

The RCWP’s belief in acting on this divine call goes beyond the liberation of women from “an outdated, monarchial, legalistic, power-driven, oppressive church”; it also seeks to serve all those who had been marginalized (Boucin, 2008, p. 52). Elise Hainz McGrath (2008)

puts the idea of ordination as an act of justice well when she says “my ordination has to do with justice; it has to do with reform; it has to do with solidarity and freedom and world community” (p. 110). The concept of solidarity figures prominently in Mary Frances Smith’s (2008) description of how the oppression faced by women in the Catholic Church makes them uniquely open to the concept that “the Eucharist is all about [inclusivity and relief from poverty]...you cannot come to the table and not bring with you the realization of how many people are not fed out there: spiritually, yes, but also physically” (p. 137). This awareness plays out in actions such as Womenpriest Judith A.B. Lee’s (2008) “Church in the Park”, a ministry to the homeless where she presides over the Mass and Eucharist in Ft. Myers, Florida. It also plays out in the work of Womenpriest Gabriella Velardi Ward (2008), who sees her ordination as a way to confront the abuses of priests, particularly those perpetrated against children. For both Lee and Ward it is not enough to simply argue that the Church is not doing enough to help those on the margins. Nor is it possible to help those in need from a position of lay ministry.

By receiving ordination and then presiding over rituals for neglected communities, Womenpriests like Ward and Lee make a dual argument. On one level, they simply enact the idea that they are living a call which they believe to be divine, but on another level, they are directing a powerful criticism toward the official Church. They are saying to the Church you have failed to serve these communities, despite having mercy and service at the heart of your purported mission, but we are serving them, with the sacrament and ritual that official priests will not provide.

For the RCWP, the sacraments, particularly Holy Orders, provide an avenue through which they can perform acts of justice. Performing these sacramental rituals also allows them to seize power that is denied to them by the official Roman Catholic Church. Such actions allow

them to challenge the subjugation of women by the rules of the Church and by individual priests who have abused their position of leadership. Finally, by taking the step beyond discourse and actually conducting the rites of the Catholic Church, the RCWP is able to challenge the official Church and accuse them of failing to uphold their sacred duty to the downtrodden of the world. This argument is made more powerful by the fact that women, without the assistance of the official Church and its resources, are able to perform these acts of mercy. For a patriarchal institution such as the Roman Catholic Church, this is a potent critique.

The way in which the RCWP uses ritual clearly enacts their rhetorical themes. By performing the traditional sacramental rite, the group demonstrates a commitment to the Sacred Tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. Conferring this rite upon women suggests a belief that it is not contrary to the spirit of the enduring tradition of the Roman Catholic Church and the interpretation of the official Church is wrong for excluding women. The way in which the RCWP conducts religious services after their ordination, specifically the celebration of the Eucharist, communicates a fidelity to the ways of the early church. Such behavior argues that the way of the RCWP works because it is the way the founders of the religion intended for the Church. Finally, the way in which ordained womenpriests in RCWP enact their call of service shows a dedication to the traditional church mission of Justice. By performing religious rites for groups which are traditionally neglected by the Church, the RCWP calls the official Church out for their failure to serve in the manner demonstrated by Christ. However, the sacramental actions of the RCWP go beyond the enactment of these three discursive themes and symbolically argue for the larger mission of the movement.

Dinges (1987) argues that ritual functions as “a cultural symbol that gives expression to social codes” (p.138). The RCWP uses the cultural symbols of the Roman Catholic Church to

challenge the social codes of the institution on a profound level. The RCWP claims “we women are no longer asking permission to be priests. Instead, we have taken back our rightful God-given place ministering to Catholics as inclusive and welcoming priests” (Mission Statement of RCWP, 2010).

The symbolic power of the sacraments is not simply metaphoric to the faithful; it is real. The grace received through baptism, or participation in the Eucharistic meal truly gives those who believe a share in the promise of everlasting life. The RCWP does not dispute this. Instead, the group argues that the Roman Catholic Church is holding these paths to grace hostage through an insistence on an unnecessary hierarchical system. By performing the sacraments and arguing for their full validity, the RCWP claims that the institutional Church is unnecessary, and that the community of believers has access to the grace of God without sacrificing the heritage of the faith. Such arguments could be presented in discursive form, but are much more powerful when enacted through ritual for this situation.

#### *Ritual Enactment as Argument*

To understand how ritual enactment may function as argument one must recall the connection of myth to ritual. Myths are those stories which are most deeply imbedded into the psyche of a community and rituals are those actions which serve to enact and invoke the myth. To say that the performance of an act serves as an argument is hardly new. However, ritual goes beyond action as an enactment of a myth. By performing a ritual, one asserts a belief in the importance of the myth and the efficacy of the ritual action to make manifest some truth within that myth (Doty, 2000, Eliade, 1968). Because ritual functions not only to enact the mythic heritage of a community but also to maintain a social reality, ritual actions also affirm such systems, or in the case of the RCWP, challenge them.

In order for the enactment of ritual to function as a reformatory argument three factors must be present. First, the ritual must have a clear resonant role in the community in which it is enacted. Often rituals remain long after a myth has ceased to be truly resonant within a community. Violating such ritual practices is relatively easy and causes little scandal within the community. In modern American society, a bride who chose not to be given away by her father would not be seen as challenging the mythic truths of the community. Other myths endure, and violating the rituals that enact them is seen as threatening the community that is defined by the myth. To refuse the blessing of Holy Oil during baptism would be denying the theology of the priesthood of the baptized within the Roman Catholic Church. Second, the purpose of enacting the ritual must be something more than the traditional performance of the rite. Third, significant changes to the rite, which serve a symbolic, rather than practical, function, should be present. The choice of modern Plains Indians to construct sweat lodges out of canvas tarps rather than bison hides is a practical choice, one which does not change or challenge the ritual of the sweat. In contrast, the inclusion of women in the sweat lodge does have symbolic meaning.

In the case of the RCWP, all three of these elements are present. The sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church remain very much a part of the identity and practice of the religion. In fact, the sacraments of Holy Orders and Eucharist, as practiced by the Roman Catholic Church, are unique to it, serving as key elements of Roman Catholic identity. Therefore, by enacting these sacramental rituals the RCWP is challenging the mythic reality of the Roman Catholic Church. Next, the RCWP is clearly motivated by their desire to reform the Roman Catholic Church and to create a more inclusive society. The organization does not wish simply to share the Eucharistic meal with communities that have been neglected, but to show how the official Church has neglected these communities, and how the changes they suggest will correct such

inequities. Finally, by ordaining women, and allowing women to perform sacramental rites the RCWP performs the sacred rites in a manner which is contrary to traditional practice. They have not done so simply because there were no men available to perform the rite, but because they wished to change the rules that guided the rite. Clearly, the way in which the RCWP uses ritual serves as a powerful symbolic argument.

*Conclusion:*

In this chapter, I laid out an argument for understanding how ritual enactment serves as argument and how it was used by the RCWP. I outlined a definition of myth and ritual, explaining the interdependent relationship of the two concepts and the significance of sacramental action in comparison to other symbolic acts. I detailed how the RCWP enacted their key rhetorical themes through their ritual behavior. Specifically, the RCWP enacted the theme of Tradition, a key element of Roman Catholic theology, by strategically performing illicit rituals according to the valid custom which has been laid out and affirmed by Roman Catholic Tradition. Finally, the RCWP demonstrates a commitment to the theme of Justice, understood as a cardinal virtue of the Roman Catholic Church, through their performance of ritual ministry.



## **Chapter Five:**

### **Implications and Conclusion**

The current study is at its heart a movement study examining the rhetoric of the RCWP, a feminist movement fighting a hegemonic, hierarchical institution. However, this study differs from traditional movement studies in that it focuses not on the stages of development of the movement but instead on the arguments and strategies employed by the women of the RCWP against the seemingly insurmountable odds of fighting the Roman Catholic Church. Specifically, I examine how ritual functioned as a rhetorical strategy and argue for an understanding of ritual as an argumentative tool. In chapter one, I set up this problem and explored the existing literature on women and the priesthood as well as the theoretical examinations of movements in religious contexts. In chapter two, I provided a brief history of women in the Roman Catholic tradition, focusing on the pivotal moments and historical trends that effected women throughout the two thousand year history of the Church. I examined the major themes of the rhetoric of the RCWP in chapter three. Three major themes were identified, specifically, tradition, origin myths, and justice. Using these themes as a foundation I argued for an understanding of ritual as the enactment of these themes and as an independent rhetorical strategy in chapter four. In this chapter, I examine the implications of this study for an understanding of the RCWP and for communication studies.

#### *Implications*

Given that the RCWP is an ongoing movement, it is not possible to evaluate the success or failure of the movement, nor is that the aim of the current study. It is, however, possible to identify and evaluate themes that emerged from this study. Four key implications may be identified from this project. The first is the tension within the Roman Catholic Church between

the role of tradition and the role of justice as guiding principles for action. Second, is the existence of flexibility in the use of history, even mythic origin stories, as evidence for justifying modern practice. Third is the tension between the authority of the Church hierarchy and the authority of the individual in matters of faith, call, and service. These three can be understood collectively as the tensions that are inherent in movements that operate within predominately mythic systems. Fourth, and separate from these tensions, is an understanding of the uses and abuses of ritual as a means for rhetorical argument beyond an expression of a mythic belief.

#### Tension between Tradition and Justice

The tension between key defining characteristics within mythic systems often creates a precarious balance. In chapter four, I explained how myths that fail to resonate within society are often rejected. In the case of the RCWP and the Catholic Church the issue lies in an understanding of the equality of women. Rosemary Ruether (1999) acknowledges that “Christianity from its New Testament beginnings exhibited a deep tension between egalitarian and patriarchal views of women” (p. 214). Ruether (1999) develops this argument explaining that the feminist movements of the 1840’s, and again in the late twentieth century, forced Christianity to reexamine the balance between the equality of women and the power and tradition of patriarchy, but that the inconsistencies remain. In *Pacem in Terris* Pope John XXIII (1963) argued that “women are now taking a part in public life. ... Since women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments, but demand rights befitting a human person both in domestic and in public life” (§41). John XXIII (1963) further asserted that “The dignity of the human person involves the right to take an active part in public affairs and to contribute one's part to the common good of the citizens” (§ 26). Through such arguments, John XXIII effectively ended the centuries-old

policy, which held women as inferior by design and acknowledged openly that women were fully human. The Pope was also careful to link this change to the enduring traditions of the Roman Catholic Church (see §14 of *Pacem in Terris*). However, members of the RCWP, as well as many in the larger movement, see the continued denial of Holy Orders for women as inconsistent with this change. This feeling is made more poignant by John XXIII's (1963) statement that:

Human beings have the right to choose freely the state of life which they prefer, and therefore the right to set up a family, with equal rights and duties for man and woman, and also the right to follow a vocation to the priesthood or the religious life. (§ 15)

If the Church has established that it is not just to oppress women, and that despite centuries of oppression, fair treatment of women is consistent with the design and traditions of the faith, it would appear to be a contradiction to exclude them from the clergy on the basis of tradition.

In chapter three, I examined the themes of tradition and justice as dominant concepts in the rhetoric of both the RCWP and the Roman Catholic Church. For the Roman Catholic Church, tradition represents an integral component of the *depositum fidei*, the evidence in the scriptures and the traditions of the Church that govern its dogma and practices. As self-proclaimed members of the Roman Catholic Church, the RCWP also places importance on respecting the traditions of the faith and grounding their actions in those traditions. However, justice is also an essential concept for both the Roman Catholic Church, which holds it as one of the four cardinal virtues, and also for the RCWP, which sees justice as vital to their sense of religious call. The problem lies in the fact that these two components, both of which are considered fundamental to the practice of the Roman Catholic faith, seem to be at odds with one another.

The call of justice would seem to demand that any faithful Catholic who feels called to serve as a priest should be able serve their community in this capacity. Tradition, on the other hand, is used to suggest that there is a set plan, one that was sacredly ordained, that limits the role of priest to a select group of straight, chaste, baptized males. Neither the Catholic Church, nor the RCWP can fully dismiss either component or the fact that there is an apparent conflict between them. Instead, they must adapt their understanding of one, or both, concepts in order to resolve the conflict.

The Catholic Church makes this adaptation through the interpretation of justice and their interpretation of the dignity of women in papal documents declaring the priesthood an exclusively male club. Claims such as that “Mary... received neither the mission proper to the Apostles nor the ministerial priesthood clearly shows that the non-admission of women to priestly ordination cannot mean that women are of lesser dignity, nor can it be construed as discrimination against them” (John Paul II, 1994, §3), are used to make modern understandings of justice and equality fit with existing Church tradition. The fact that the Pope and others in the Roman Catholic hierarchy have felt it necessary to make statements like this shows that they are aware that on the surface the appeals to tradition and appeals to justice contradict.

The RCWP is also aware of this contradiction, though they have tended to make their corrections in the interpretation of tradition. By ordaining within the tradition of apostolic tradition and arguing for the existence of female priests in the early years of the Church, the RCWP argues that if history is read correctly there is a tradition for the ordination of women and the failure to acknowledge that tradition unfairly oppresses women within the Church. Dana Reynolds’ (2008) argument that “we [the members of the RCWP] are a discipleship of equals who are reclaiming the table ministry of Eucharistic celebration and our apostolic authority as

servant leaders,” (p. 41) is illustrative of this tendency. The RCWP links the definition of true virtues to tradition, arguing that their behavior can be linked to the traditions of the Catholic Church, if only those traditions are understood properly.

### The Flexibility of History and Mythology

Closely related to efforts to reconcile traditions and virtues in the modern world is the use of historical precedent to justify current conditions. The use of historical precedent in argument has been a mainstay of argumentation from its inception. Aristotle included argument from past example in his list of enthymemes in *The Rhetoric* (see Book II, Ch 17, 20). However, it is also well established that arguments from historical precedent may be spurious, not because they contain an *ad antiquium* fallacy, but because the understanding of history itself is fluid. The way in which the institutional Church and the RCWP conflict in their interpretations of the founding moments of the Church illustrates that this issue applies to mythic histories as well as those histories which are founded on factual scientific evidence.

New translations of the Bible, archeological finds, and the discoveries of long forgotten texts are constantly redefining and challenging the understanding of the period in which Jesus lived and the founding of the Christian community that followed. Reinterpretation of the foundational moments of the Church allows the RCWP to simply argue that the institutional Church has been wrong, that certain important facts have been ignored or missed and that when these facts are taken into consideration the current laws and practices of the Church are no longer acceptable or appropriate. Such a strategy can be seen in the RCWP’s descriptions of house churches (see. Meehan, 2008) as well as the way in which members interpret particular biblical passages.

The Roman Catholic Church also cites history in support of their position. The citation of Pauline epistles to prohibit women from preaching is an excellent example. At issue here is not a question as to which interpretation is correct, but the fact that even within a mythological system historical interpretation is fluid. Those interpretations which support the position already held are favored, and those interpretations which challenge that position are rejected, even if said interpretation had previously been espoused. Considering the understanding of myths as the truest of true stories, the fact that historical evidence can be debated indicates that all mythic systems can evolve. Further exploration into how other ideological organization's use and manipulate their mythic heritage is necessary. However, it is clear from the current study that while there is a certain fluidity to the truth asserted by myths, the accepted truth at any given point in history is still seen as immutable. Thus, while the Church has shifted its position several times, that which the Church asserts as correct is the guide for what is acceptable in this given time and place. Further, because of the fact that myths have a strong association with identity, it is unlikely that the reinterpretation of historical data by the RCWP will sway the institutional Church or that interpretations of the Church will sway the RCWP.

#### Authority to whom?

A key element of the RCWP's rhetoric is the concept of prophetic (dis)obedience, the insistence that a good Catholic is called to serve God according their own best understanding of His will, even if that puts one at odds with the authority of the institutional Church. This tension, between the authority of the institution and the authority of the self as a believer is a key element in understanding the RCWP. It is also an issue which impacts most, if not all mythic systems.

Womenpriest Eileen DiFranco (2008) says that "as Jesus proved by his life and his death, a Christian must be willing to act *contra legem* whenever laws harm individuals within the Body

of Christ” (p. 60). Further, DiFranco, citing an unnamed theology professor, argues that God “needed people to remain on the outside of institutions—even to the point of excommunication—in order to hold institutions to their mission” (p. 61). Clearly, the position of the RCWP (McGrath, *et al.*, 2008), that they “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,” (p. 2) puts them at odds with the institutional Church and the authority of the papacy.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, along with Code of Canon Law establishes a hierarchy which gives the Pope the authority to make rulings on matters of doctrine, practice, and policy. While the Roman Catholic Church has always been careful to clarify the fact that the Pope is not god incarnate and is not to be worshiped, the fact remains that the Pope’s authority to interpret the intentions of God on earth is a foundational element of the Roman Catholic Rite. In the case of the possible ordination of women, this is further complicated by the fact that the Church asserts that it has no authority to change the policy as it is based on an interpretation of Christ’s intentions, and is therefore divine law, not church law.

Both the Church and the RCWP believe they are acting on sacred mandate making it is unlikely they will be able to find common ground. This belief in divine mandate colors the way in which they view all aspects of the debate. Each party feels certain that their understandings of tradition and virtue and historical and mythic origins is correct. At the same time, given the nature of the debate, as a movement to change the sacred practices of a religious institution, it seems likely that barring some event that would cause one party or the other to reevaluate their interpretations of God’s position they will be permanently at an impasse.

### Ritual as Rhetorical Strategy

The RCWP's use of ritual as argument has clearly gained the attention of the Roman Catholic Church and forced it to address these women and their arguments. Publically held ordination ceremonies and Mass presided over by womenpriests cannot be ignored the same way discursive arguments can be dismissed as the misinformed rambling of malcontents. As explained in chapter four, rituals are the enactment of myths and are therefore intricately connected with the sacred.

The RCWP's use of ritual is clearly an effective attention gaining strategy. However, it may also be the strategy which serves the mission of the RCWP the least as it allows the Roman Catholic Church to sidestep the question of sexism and instead focus on the fact that the members of the RCWP have violated the sacred rituals of the faith. As explained in chapter four, the Church has strict rules which guide the proper conduct of the sacraments. For example, only a fully ordained priest may consecrate the Eucharist. It could, arguably, be considered equally scandalous for a man who had not received Holy Orders recognized by the Church to preside over a Catholic Mass. This is evident in the language used by the Vatican in their warnings and condemnations of the RCWP. While they do not shy away from the fact that it is women who have committed the acts, they focus in issues such as the need to "protect the nature and validity of the sacrament of holy orders," (in McGrath, Meehan, Ramming, 2008, p. 1). In the official warning issued to the Danube Seven, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith(2002) explained that "because the "ordaining" Bishop belongs to a schismatic community, it is also a serious attack on the unity of the Church" (§2). When the Church does acknowledge the issue of women it is forced to make the difficult argument that "such action is an affront to the dignity of women, whose specific role in the Church is distinctive and irreplaceable" (2002, §2). In the



official writ of excommunication (2002) the gravity of the situation is related particularly to the fact “they [the Danube Seven] formally and obstinately reject a doctrine which the Church has always taught and lived “( §10). Thus, except as it applies to the doctrinal rule of a male only clergy, the Church is able to found their arguments against the RCWP on the way the RCWP uses and abuses sacrament, rather than on the fact they are women.

While it is clear that the RCWP’s use of ritual has forced the Church to acknowledge the movement and to respond to it, that same strategy makes it possible for the Roman Catholic Church to ignore the fundamental demands of the RCWP on the grounds it has sullied the sacred rituals of the Church. It is likely that this circumstance is not entirely unique to the debate within the Roman Catholic Church and the RCWP. Future research should examine how the use of ritual plays out in other movements within religious institutions.

### *Conclusion*

The current study began as an effort to understand the strategies of the Roman Catholic Womenpriest movement. In particular, the way in which the RCWP used ritual and the manner in which both the RCWP and the Roman Catholic Church responded to the exigencies presented by the movement for the ordination of women into Roman Catholic clergy was considered. The rhetorical themes of the movement were identified as appeals to tradition, arguments from origin myth, and appeals to the virtue of justice. These themes manifested themselves throughout the rhetoric of the RCWP and were effectively linked to Roman Catholic identity. Further, these themes were enacted in the ritual performances of the RCWP.

It is clear that the RCWP’s use of ritual as well the linking of their major rhetorical themes to key identity characteristics of Roman Catholic Church served to engage the movement with the institution it seeks to change. However, it is also apparent that the ideological nature of

the situation and the players involved has created an impasse. It is unlikely that RCWP will be successful in persuading the Roman Catholic Church to change in the near term. Despite this fact, the RCWP is a powerful movement who deserve continued attention and analysis. It did, after all, take the Church nearly 400 years to admit that Copernicus and Galileo were correct and the Earth does indeed revolve around the Sun.

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