

Women Priest Gather

Catholic Women Priests: Exploring Our Common Roots & Call

November 1, 2013 Milwaukee, WI

Perhaps it is human nature, but it often seems that if we are not careful, we have a tendency to recreate the very systems and institutions we have chosen to leave. Oppression Theory tells us that within groups that have historically been oppressed, there is a tendency to turn that oppression on others within the group. A kind of stratification happens within the oppressed group defining some as better than others. It was for this very reason that I contacted Bishop Andrea Johnson of Roman Catholic Women Priests (RCWP) to see if we could bring the women priests from RCWP and the women priests of our Ecumenical Catholic Communion together for a retreat.

In discussions with Andrea, we discovered that both groups had a fair amount of misinformation and misconceptions about the priests of the other organization, and this was leading to animosity between the groups. Each group questioned the authenticity of the ordinations of the other women- everything from the validity of their ordination, each other's apostolic succession, training and education. On our end, I heard members of the ECC indicate that the RCWP priests think 'they're better than we are, because they claim to be Roman Catholic. Who do they think they are? The RC Church doesn't recognize them as being Roman Catholic any more than it recognizes us!'

The first time I overheard these claims I was disturbed and knew it was time to bring our groups together to share our history. In actuality the roots of ECC and RCWP are closely tied together. While Andrea and I already knew one another through WOC and RAPPORT (a consecrated group of women who are called to ordination), our journeys became more closely tied the summer of 2000. At that time I was the family minister at the newly created Spiritus Christi Church and we were looking for a path to ordination for myself, and for our pastor, Mary Ramerman. Spiritus Christi decided to host a conference: **Women's Ordination 2000: Where? When? How?** Through my work on the WOC board I was aware of Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger in Austria, who had founded a training program for women who felt called to ordination. While she didn't yet know how it was going to happen, Christine fully intended this group of women would be ordained. I knew we needed to get to know Christine, so we invited her to give a presentation at the conference. We also invited other leading women in the reform movement, including Maureen Fiedler, Dolly Pomerleau, Andrea Johnson, Christine Schenk and Elfriede Harth.

It was a great conference and when the weekend ended we knew the discussions needed to continue. While Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger worked on the other side of the big pond to find an avenue to ordination for the women in her training course, we worked for a path to ordination in the United States. Shortly after that, Mary Ramerman heard about Bishop Peter through the article the National Catholic Reporter did after he ordained his first woman, our own Rev. Kathy McCarthy. After meeting Bishop Peter, it became clear that this was the right path for Spiritus Christi Church. Mary Ramerman was ordained a priest on Nov 17, 2001 and I was ordained to the diaconate on April 23, 2002. Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger came for both of these ordinations and celebrated with us. She talked with Bishop Peter and while she supported this path for us, it was not the right path for her and the women in her program.

Meanwhile, in Austria, Christine was working on plans of her own. The ordinations on the Danube were scheduled for June 29, 2002. In this country, I had followed the progress and the plans for the ordination. Bishop Peter and I even talked about whether he should accept an invitation from Christine to attend these ordinations and participate in the laying on of hands. We determined that this might lead to confusion. At that time it was not clear what the criteria was for ordination and we wondered what his participation would mean in regard to the ECC, so neither he, nor I, attended the ordination of the Danube Seven. To this day I regret not being in attendance to stand in solidarity with my sisters who were ordained that day!

The following February (2/22/03) Bishop Peter ordained me to the priesthood. Yet again, Christine Mayr-Lumetberger came from Austria to be there in support. Prior to the ceremony Christine pulled me aside. She told me that she had been secretly consecrated as a bishop, and while it was not yet public, she wanted me to know that there were two bishops laying hands on me that day!! What a gift- something I treasure. As far as I know, I'm the only woman priest who's been ordained with a bishop from ECC and from RCWP!!

As we moved forward with two different paths to ordination, there was a solid bond between both groups. We had taken different paths, however one thing that stood strong was that both of these paths were legitimate, valid, inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit. We are living in an exciting time in our church. A time when the Holy Spirit is finding new avenues to ordination. We have choices during this time. If we're not careful, we'll recreate the very system we have come out from; a system which judges others instead of celebrating them; a system that defines some as better than others, some as holier than others, some as being "valid" and others as being "invalid." If we're not careful, we begin throwing stones at those we should stand shoulder to shoulder with. If there's one thing I've learned in finding an "irregular" path to ordination, it's that what's important is not where I stand with Rome, or the Vatican, or the Pope. It's not where I stand with other priests- male or female. What's important is where I stand in the eyes of God, and how I live my ordination to bring about Christ's work in our world. In the eyes of God there is no need for me to look to others to be validated, nor is there any need to validate myself by defining someone else as not good enough. RCWP have chosen a path within the institutional church and those of us within the ECC have willingly chosen a path to ordination outside of the institution Roman Catholic Church. Neither path is better or more appropriate. In fact- each path is needed in today's world!!

In honoring each group it is important to allow each group to define themselves in the way they see fit. I know I do not want anyone to define me as not being "catholic" because I wasn't ordained by a Roman Catholic bishop. I'm also sure that the women priests of RCWP do not like when others indicate that they are not really Roman Catholic because they've broken canon law or been excommunicated. When we question the identity and integrity of any other group we do so from the narrowness that marks the hierarchical church. If we want to help to build the kingdom of God on earth, if we want to live out the gospel values, then it's very important for us to be aware of our words or our reactions towards one another.

On Friday, November 1, 2013 in Milwaukee, WI the retreat that Andrea Johnson and I planned took place; seventeen women priests from the ECC and RCWP gathered for "***Catholic Women Priests: Exploring Our Common Roots & Call***". Andrea and I shared our joint history and encouraged discussion among the women. We talked about what awakened each of us to our call to the catholic priesthood, identified our common threads and common goals and talked about ways to support one another. We closed our time together with a celebration of the Eucharist, bringing together aspects of the ways each group celebrates Mass. As we finished many were asking about making this an annual or semi-annual gathering.

After the retreat ended, the majority of us attended a special reception for clergy who were in attendance at the Call to Action conference. Of the 20+ priests who were in attendance at the reception, only seven were male. While we were warmly welcomed, and the banter between us was all very friendly, we definitely opened some eyes. As one of the male priests indicated "Fr Fred invited me to come with him to this reception, and I thought- that's a great idea, it will give me a chance to gather with some of my brother priests. I had no idea there would be women priests here as well!" It was the first time most of the male priests had ever talked with a female priest. In fact I'm quite sure at least one of them didn't know we were out there! Despite this, we again found many areas that we have in common with our RC brother priests. I'm quite certain we all came away richer because of it.

So often, I find my presence as a woman priest creates avenues to open up people's awareness and creates opportunities for growth. In the end, in Milwaukee we created new relationships, better understanding and a realization of the ways the Holy Spirit is moving within us and among us. We have far more in common than we might realize. Each one of us has experienced a call from God to ordained ministry and we have sought an avenue to fulfill that call. Through this retreat we formed new relationships as sisters.