

THE LADY IS A BISHOP
by Marjorie Reiley Maguire

"This is not being done for you. It is so this work of justice may continue in the Church." With these words, an unnamed, male, Roman Catholic bishop of a diocese, who is in full communion with Rome, told Patricia Fresen that he had decided to ordain her as one of three female Roman Catholic bishops in the world. The "work of justice" to which he referred was the continued preparation and ordination of women as Roman Catholic priests.

Bishop Patricia was recently on a speaking tour in the Midwest, telling her story of how a nice Catholic girl from South Africa, who was a Dominican sister for 45 years, became an ordained priest and bishop in the Roman Catholic Church.

Patricia grew up under South Africa's apartheid. As a young child she thought the whole world was like that, a place where white people had all the better things in society, where there were signs for white people's beaches and white people's benches, etc. She also assumed that God had arranged it that way. As she left childhood, she realized that this neat division into black and white was not the Will of God. It was unjust. Through her experience in her Dominican community, which had broken barriers of white and black among the sisters and in their schools, Patricia came to understand that there is a moral obligation to change unjust laws and that this is often done by refusal to obey those laws. Therefore, when she heard about the ordination of seven Catholic women on the Danube in 2002, she immediately recognized that their ordinations were moral resistance to the apartheid of sexism in the Catholic Church.

Patricia had felt a longing within her to be a priest for many years. This longing began after she was sent by her superiors out of South Africa for the first time in her life, at the age of forty, to study theology in Rome. The diocese wanted her to get a licentiate in theology so she could teach in the seminary because they decided that seminarians needed a female presence in their life.

In Rome, she got better marks in theology classes than many of the young men. She often became their informal tutor for exams. And she worked with people who told her their problems, even their sins, and who wanted her to be the person to give them absolution. Yet, as each ordination event came around, she was excluded. For the first time in her life, this daughter of apartheid understood what it was like to be the object of discrimination. Her first reaction was anger. But gradually the anger changed into longing and then into a sense of a call from God.

Like so many women, Patricia suppressed this vocation to the priesthood because it made her too unhappy to feel this call, while knowing the Church would not ordain women. She returned to South Africa and taught in the country's only seminary for seven years, as its only woman faculty member. One of her subjects was homiletics. She could teach the seminarians how to preach, even appearing in videos giving a model homily. But she could never preach an actual homily to these same seminarians at a community liturgy. One day a priest on the faculty invited her to give a homily for the first time, on the occasion of the national observance of women's day. In spite of her hours and hours of preparation, her homily was never presented because the seminarians began hissing as they realized she was the one approaching the pulpit to speak. To his credit, the priest-president removed his vestments and refused to continue with the Mass.

Patricia left the seminary after that and moved to teaching at the university. Her life was changed in 2002, when she read the story of the ordination of the Danube 7, and then had the opportunity to meet with two of the women priests, Christine Mayr Lumetzberger of Austria and Gisela Forster of Germany. In 2004, Christine and Gisela informed Patricia that they had been ordained bishops and they would ordain her a priest, when all three would be in Spain for a women's synod.

Patricia was 98% sure that her Dominican community in South Africa would stand behind her and accept her ordination, since they had always been leaders in the fight against apartheid. They taught her that breaking unjust laws is often the only way to change them. However, after

checking with various theologians and Roman congregations, her community gave her the ultimatum from Rome - either confess her sin of being ordained and never tell anyone about it, or ask for a dispensation from her Dominican vows of 45 years. (Interestingly, she was never excommunicated. And Rome apparently recognized her ordination as valid, since they did not want anyone to know about it.) To save problems for her community, Patricia requested the dispensation, giving as her reason that she had been ordained a Roman Catholic priest. However, there was no dispensation for her heart, where she remains a Dominican.

Removed from her community at the age of 63, Patricia was rescued by the kind offer from Bishop Gisela Forster in Germany to share Gisela's home. Patricia is learning German and has a small, paid, pastoral ministry position with a team that visits sick people and elderly in their homes. Then, in 2005, the unnamed male bishop told her he would ordain her a bishop. Tears streamed down his face, as well as hers, when he laid hands on her head and said he was ordaining her in full apostolic succession. He gave her documents naming his predecessor bishops in apostolic succession back to the early centuries of the Church. The name Patricia Fresen is printed after his in this long ecclesiastical genealogy. Those documents are in a bank vault, only to be made public after the male bishop dies. To follow all the rules of canon law, the male bishop who ordained her was joined by two other legitimate male bishops. Also in attendance were the two previously-ordained women bishops and a fourth legitimate male bishop, six bishops in all.

Besides her small secular job, Patricia now heads up the formation program for new priest candidates in Roman Catholic Womenpriests. Men as well as women are accepted into the program. There is no celibacy requirement. Sexuality is separated from the call to priesthood. There are presently 115 women, 2 gay men, and 3 married men in the program.

After her talk, Bishop Patricia celebrated Mass for us, together with a woman deacon who will be ordained a priest this coming summer in Pittsburgh. Perhaps the most telling sign of the kind of bishop Patricia is came when she sat down after reading the Gospel. The deacon, not the bishop, preached the homily. While some of us later admitted that we felt a pang of disappointment that Patricia would not preach, we then realized that Patricia was modeling the non-hierarchical Church and discipleship of equals that she claimed Roman Catholic Womenpriests is all about. And the deacon did a very good job!

I drove 90 miles to hear Bishop Patricia's talk in Chicago. However, I did not need to learn about the juridical details to know that her ordination is valid and that her Mass was a true Eucharist. Although I do not want to be a priest myself, last summer I went to the ordinations of the Roman Catholic women priests and deacons on a boat on the St. Lawrence Seaway. I went out of support for the women involved and out of curiosity, but also as a skeptic about the validity of the ordinations. However, during the ordination liturgy, I experienced the grace of the moment. I experienced the ordinations as valid. I experienced Patricia, Christine, and Gisela as valid as any bishops I have known and the ordination liturgy as valid as any I have attended. Sometimes knowledge comes through such experience.

If only Pope Benedict could have that same experience! He could then give his approval for the ordination of women, saying, "This is not being done for you. It is being done so the Church will not die and the Church's work of justice can continue."

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