

Group Remains Controversial In The Eyes Of The Church**Chabot Finds Joy In Serving As Member Of Womenpriests**

By Phyllis A. Muzeroll
e-Ticker News

MANCHESTER, NH--Once the executive director of the Greater Claremont Chamber of Commerce, Theresa Novak Chabot left the community a few years ago to pursue other interests. Along the way, those interests transformed into a journey that was leading her to a new spiritual and, albeit, controversial path, that of becoming a woman priest based on her Catholic faith.

Following her tenure at the Chamber that ran from 2003-2006, she became the Director of Development for NH Catholic Charities in Manchester, commuting from Claremont for a time. Eventually she and her husband Gary would relocate to the Queen City. Chabot worked for Catholic Charities until restructuring left her without a job. From there, she worked as a development consultant for The Way Home, a non-profit that provides safe and affordable housing. With an interest in becoming a hospital chaplain, she began to pursue her religious studies, earning a Master of Arts in Theology (Pastoral Ministry/Spirituality) from St. Michael's College in Colchester, VT. After several years of serving in a variety of parish ministries, Chabot answered what she felt was the call to priesthood "to minister to those who are disillusioned with the Church but still long to be fed spiritually," she said. She serves the Church of the Holy Spirit, a Catholic Welcoming Community of Hope, in Manchester, NH, with weekly liturgies and the sacraments in addition to a wedding ministry. She says her "hope lies in a Church where diversity is celebrated and all are welcome at the Eucharistic table in the loving spirit of Jesus Christ."

Chabot, 59, is a member of what is known as Roman Catholic Womenpriests, an order not recognized by the Roman Catholic Church. The ordination of women who identify themselves as Catholic priests has, in fact, been denounced by Rome which teaches that only men can be ordained priests, based on the apostolic succession from the Church's first Pope, St. Peter. Women who claim to be ordained as Catholic priests, says the Church, are automatically excommunicated. Womenpriests argue that "The ordinations of Roman

Catholic Womenpriests are valid because of our apostolic succession within the Roman Catholic Church. The principal consecrating Roman Catholic male bishops who ordained our first women bishops are bishops with apostolic succession within the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, our bishops validly ordain deacons, priests and bishops."

Chabot was recently included in a nytimes.com slide show featuring Roman Catholic Womenpriests. According to the feature, there are now more than 100 ordained female priests and 11 bishops serving within the framework of Womenpriests. Chabot was ordained in 2010 and continues to live in Manchester with her husband.

According to the group, "the Roman Catholic Womenpriests is a renewal movement within the Church that began in Germany with the ordination of seven women on the Danube River in 2002. In 2003, Gisela Forster and Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger (two of the original Danube 7) were ordained bishops and in 2005 Patricia Fresen from South Africa (who currently lives in Germany) was also ordained a bishop. Womenbishops ordained in Apostolic Succession continue to carry out the work of ordaining women in the Roman Catholic Church. In 2006, Ida Raming was ordained a bishop and in 2008 Dana Reynolds of California became the first American Roman Catholic Woman-bishop. These women and those who have come after them continue to carry on the pastoral work of ordaining women to the priesthood. Currently there are over 145 Roman Catholic women worldwide who are reclaiming their ancient spiritual heritage and are reshaping a more inclusive, Christ-centered Church for the 21st century..."

Chabot said that the Church has taken issue with Womenpriests because "we're not playing by their rules. The only thing that holds us back is that we are women. With John Paul II, there was no discussion. They have their rules." People, she said, "don't garner that we don't follow the same hierarchy. We don't have a hierarchical model. Our pastoral consultants don't act as administrators, there is nothing hierarchical about it. All language is inclusive, and no matter the background--no church, Baptist, whatever it might be--everyone gets



**Rev. Theresa Novak Chabot
(Katie Barnes Photo)**

communion. We also have gluten-free bread and non-alcoholic wine, and the priest is the last to receive."

Chabot said there is a "whole different attitude" about attending services by a Womanpriest, "The feel is very positive. We rarely use the word 'sin', all are God's children and we all have gifts." She believes that her mission through her Church of the Holy Spirit reaches those whom she describes as "marginalized" by the Church, women and gays, for example, she said. "We are able to provide, allow, for those who feel rejected by the institutional church. Divorced are welcomed, those who have had an abortion are welcomed, those from different churches are welcomed to the table."

Chabot performs wedding services, hears confession and does baptisms, having conducted one in Claremont along the Sugar River, a ritual which she found particularly moving. It was also a special service for Rebecca Vinduska and her husband Patrick Adrian, and

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Chabot, from A11

for baby Maya Agnes.

"I have felt called to the priesthood since I was a little girl growing up in Missouri," said Vinduska. "I wrote the Bishop of the Kansas City-St. Joseph Diocese when I was 9 years old telling him I wanted to be a priest and included a P.S. I don't want to be a nun.

"As you can imagine, I was ecstatic to hear about the Womanpriest movement. My sister-in-law was the one that found out about them and she shared the information with me. When we moved to New Hampshire, imagine how excited I was to find that Theresa was just about to become a priest! I was pregnant with my daughter when I first attended Mass with Rev. Theresa officiating. How glorious it was! The use of inclusive language and the diverse community participating was wonderful. It really feels like the way I picture the Church in its beginnings. A true inclusive open and loving community. When my daughter was born, I knew that I wanted her to be baptized into a welcoming Church of equality - it only made sense to have Theresa perform the baptism. How wonderful it was to have it in the backyard, with water from the Sugar River and our friends and family there to celebrate!"

Vinduska continued, "Let me be clear - it has not been easy. I treasure the Catholic church. I treasure my 12 years of Catholic schools and the commitment to service of others which was instilled in me. I know that I could easily join another church. It saddens me that we cannot embrace the equality that other Churches have. I wish that we could put aside judgement in the name of Christ and embrace all that desire to be part of the goodness that is the Catholic church.

"My great uncle was a Catholic priest. My father's grandparents came over from Bohemia. When they settle in Kansas, the first thing they did was build a Catholic church that remains there today."

Chabot has counted other milestones as well. She said that on one occasion, the Episcopalian bishop before Gene Robinson attended one of her services and knelt before her, a gesture she found especially validating. She is open to performing same sex marriages, "if they have what it takes to be married."

Her church in Manchester attracts a small following, around six to 12 people generally attend Mass. Services are currently being held



Rebecca Vinduska claps with happiness as husband Patrick Adrian assists Rev. Chabot with baby Maya Agnes at her baptism along the Sugar River in Claremont.

in her living room. Previously, they were being held at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Manchester, but the time the space was available was not conducive to most people's schedules, prompting Chabot to move them to her home. "The right space will open up," she said. Events such as a baptism, she said, have drawn as many as 29 people. "We haven't hit 30 yet," she said, confident, however, that that day is coming. Her husband Gary helps her set up for services and is very supportive of her ministry, she said.

Some have asked her why she didn't train to become a priest in the Episcopalian or Lutheran churches since they already ordain women, but Chabot said they were not her tradition. "I knew I was a Roman Catholic woman; this is what I have always been and always will be."

When she learned of a Womanpriest who lived in Framingham, MA, she decided to contact the woman to explore the possibility of being ordained as well. She began her work down the road to ordination but said it didn't feel right for a while because she knew she would be giving up a lot in the Catholic Church. But eventually,

she followed what she believes she was led to do. "When you're called, you're called," she said. "I realized it's not about me." She said there were a lot of things in her life that were "preparing me for this." She also said she clearly heard a voice one day behind her, although there was no one sitting there, that said, "Don't deny me your prayers." She took that, she said, as a sign. She was ordained in Rochester, NY, in 2010.

Chabot, who also works as a speech pathologist in the public school system, said that passion has replaced the "pain that women experience in the Catholic Church, especially the ones who are called. I am now in a place of joy, love, positive feelings, I have no regrets."



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