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# Women's priestly ordination in the Catholic Tradition with the focus on the subversive praxis of the Roman Catholic Women Priests

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## ABSTRACT

Against the background of the recent history of the controversy regarding the Roman Catholic Church's (RCC) position on women's priestly ordination, this study focuses on an alternative ecclesiological model embodied by the Roman Catholic Women Priests (RCWP), a movement born in 2002. The article explores this unique form of dissent that strives for difference without seeking to effectuate the actual rupture from the RCC. The movement's subversive praxis is manifest chiefly in its organisational structure, in ordained women's 'pragmatic, pastoral, priesthood ministry' and in their utterly inclusive approach to sacraments. This approach – the article argues – provides a resource to overcome the doctrinal impasse on the issue of women's ordination that the RCC appears to have reached in 1983. This holds true even if the movement itself may be occupying merely a *transitory space* within the larger landscape of the new forms of priesthood emerging across Christian churches.

## KEYWORDS

Women's ordination; ordained women; Roman Catholic Women Priests; Roman Catholic Church; Catholic Tradition; priesthood; patriarchy; church renewal

## 1. Women's ordination in the Catholic Tradition: introductory remarks

The conclusions of the historical study of women's ministry in Christian churches have for a long time been censored and politicised. Only more recently, the scholarly investigations have been more officially acknowledged, also by the representatives of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) itself. Gary Macy, among other authors, claims that there is ample evidence of women deacons, for over half of Christian history, until the 12th century.<sup>1</sup> This is when the diaconate was purposefully closed to women by the Church for reasons that include the introduction of purity laws drawn from the Hebrew scriptures<sup>2</sup> and a change in the definition of ordination.<sup>3</sup> The new definition included the assumption of the ordained as being bestowed with an indelible character on their souls that set them apart from other Christians.<sup>4</sup> Inherent in such a metaphysical definition was the notion that it cannot happen to a female soul. Towards the end of the twelfth

<sup>1</sup>Macy, 'Women Deacons', 9–36.

<sup>2</sup>According to those laws, both menstruation and childbirth were considered impediments to women serving at the altar. See *Ibid.*, 32. See also Geere, *Feminist Ecclesiology*, 13.

<sup>3</sup>Macy, 'Women Deacons', 32.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 34.

century, Huguccio of Bologna, the most influential canonist of his age, stated that, even if a woman were to be ordained, it would not ‘take,’ since it is simply ‘metaphysically impossible’ for women to receive orders. As Macy concludes, ‘despite opposition from Abelard and a few other writers, twelfth-century writers moved from conceding that women were once ordained, to teaching that women never were ordained, to teaching, finally, that women never could and never would be ordained.’<sup>5</sup>

Regarding women’s priestly ordination, the analysis of the church documents reveals the apparent continuity through the centuries of its prohibition in law, from Gratian’s *Decretum* or *Concordia Discordantium Canonum* in the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century to the present Code of Canon Law.<sup>6</sup> And yet the same texts from Gratian and others ‘seem to show that, at some stage in the Church’s history, women were ordained at least as “deaconesses,” if not as *presbytera*.’<sup>7</sup> Fr Eric Doyle, O.F.M., a member of the Assisi Commission,<sup>8</sup> tellingly stated in his report that ‘to ordain women would be contrary to the *practice* of the church [rather than to the church *tradition* per se].’<sup>9</sup> Doyle concluded his paper by pointing out that ‘there is a growing body of theological opinion which maintains that there is no serious doctrinal argument against the ordination of women and that God did not exclude women from the priesthood. Therefore, it must be recognised that the question about women priests is an open question both theologically and pastorally in the Roman Catholic Church.’<sup>10</sup>

This study seeks to realise three interrelated research objectives. First, it provides an overview of the controversy around the RCC’s position on women’s priestly ordination, focusing on its recent history: from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century till Francis’ papacy. Second, it provides a historical account of the emergence of the Roman Catholic Women Priests (RCWP) as a dissent movement that strives for difference without seeking to effectuate the actual rupture from the RCC. Third, it highlights three key facets of RCWP’s alternative ecclesiological model, namely its organisational structure, ‘pragmatic, pastoral, priesthood ministry’ carried out by the ordained women, and their utterly inclusive approach to sacraments. In conclusion, we offer a few insights into the RCWP’s subversive praxis as a potential means to overcome the doctrinal impasse reached by the RCC on the issue of women’s ordination in the context of the profound crisis currently faced by the Church.

We have approached the research problem at hand from two perspectives: Dianne Willman is a trained theologian and a member of RCWP who was ordained in South Africa in 2019. In her contribution to the paper, she draws not only on external sources but also on her intimate knowledge of the movement and the dynamics inherent in the daily ministry as a Catholic woman priest. Jakub Urbaniak is a scholar in religious studies and theology, also coming from a Roman Catholic background; he views the RCWP phenomenon through historical, theological, religious and cultural lenses, as he attempts to grasp its uniqueness and situate it within the larger landscape of the new forms of priesthood emerging across Christian churches. Ultimately, it has been the dialogue

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 36.

<sup>6</sup>Waller, ‘A Critical Survey’, 5.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>8</sup>It was an ecumenical group created at the Assisi Conference of 1975, formed of representatives from the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches, whose focus was on the issue of women’s ordination.

<sup>9</sup>Doyle, ‘The Ordination of Women’, IV.3 [our italics].

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., V.2.

between these two researchers and their respective perspectives throughout the study that has shaped the article into its current form.

## 2. Historical-ecclesial background to the Roman Catholic position

Various Christian denominations grappled with the issue of women's ordination over time. Some like the Anglican Communion came to accept and include the ordination of women as priests as early as the 1970s.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, the exclusion of women from the ordained ministry of the RCC remains a no-go area for some, and a highly contested issue for others.

### 2.1. Major doctrinal developments between Vatican II and Francis' Papacy

The long-held and current official position of the RCC is set out in canon 1024 of the Code of Canon Law: 'A baptised male alone receives sacred ordination validly,' that is, only men can be ordained as deacons and priests.<sup>12</sup> Notwithstanding this seemingly clear position, the issue of women's ordination has remained a source of controversy after this canon was included in the *CIC* in 1983.

Various events gave rise to the amendment in canon law. Partly stimulated by the rise in Christian feminism in the 1950's, the issue gained traction in the RCC due to the shift that appeared to take place through Vatican II.<sup>13</sup> New theological ideas emerged from the Council such as the notion of the Church as 'the people of God,' which entailed 'the recognition that the whole Church is called to holiness, and the affirmation of the dignity and gifts of lay men and women.'<sup>14</sup> These ideas raised awareness and stimulated more active participation of women in the Church, especially in areas of ministry previously reserved only for men, which participation was already taking place in civil society and some other churches.<sup>15</sup>

More particularly, the papal statements that were issued at the time of Vatican II sustained the growing consciousness in respect of women's involvement in the official Church. Pope John XXIII specifically honed in on what Clifford paraphrases as 'women's emerging consciousness' in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris*.<sup>16</sup> He noted that, as part of the signs of the times, women (mainly in Christian nations) were increasingly taking part in public life, becoming 'more conscious of their dignity' and 'claiming the rights and duties in both domestic and public life which belong to them as human persons.'<sup>17</sup> Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) further contributed to this line of thinking and the growing consciousness of women.<sup>18</sup> The latter in particular stated that 'women claim for themselves an equity with men before the

<sup>11</sup> Apart from the exceptional ordination of Florence Li Tim-Oi that took place in Hong Kong in 1944 during the wartime (subsequently she resigned her licence), the first Anglican women priests were formally ordained in 1971 in the Province of Hong Kong and Macao, and in the Church of England – in 1994, at Bristol Cathedral. See Waller, 'A Critical Survey', 14–15.

<sup>12</sup> *Code of Canon Law*, §1024 [*CIC*].

<sup>13</sup> Peterfeso, *Transgressive Traditions*, 37.

<sup>14</sup> Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 141.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, §41.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, §41.

<sup>18</sup> Peterfeso, *Transgressive Traditions*, 37; and Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 141.

law and in fact.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the document postulates that ‘every type of discrimination, whether societal or cultural, whether based on sex, race, colour, social condition, language, or religion, is to be overcome’ and that the fundamental rights of a woman ‘to embrace a state of life or acquire an education or cultural benefits equal to those recognised for men’ are not to be denied.<sup>20</sup> One of the practical ramifications of these developments was that, in the 1960s, laywomen were permitted to study theology.<sup>21</sup> As a result, theological arguments for the ordination of women started emerging.<sup>22</sup>

Yet, notwithstanding the above, the issue of women’s ordination remained officially off the proverbial table. For example, it has been argued that the emancipative postulates from *Gaudium et Spes* applied to civil or secular societies, and not to the position of women in the Church.<sup>23</sup> In the light of increasing pressure from both within and without Catholic circles, the Magisterium issued a number of statements forbidding women’s priestly ordination. The position of the RCC on the matter was officially declared, first, in *Inter Insigniores* (1977). The document stated that the RCC’s leadership ‘did not consider itself authorised to admit women to priestly ordination,’<sup>24</sup> a position reiterated by John Paul II in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* promulgated in 1994.<sup>25</sup> The *Code of Canon Law* published in 1983 reflected the position that only baptised males can receive ordination validly. Clifford refers to this position as amounting to ‘virtually an infallible teaching.’<sup>26</sup> More recently, the Vatican’s Doctrinal Chief, Archbishop Ladaria, stated that the position of the Church on the matter was definitive.<sup>27</sup> As a result of all these developments, the Church’s doctrinal position had been seemingly cemented.

This position, however, is not as clear as it may appear. For one, arguably the teaching is not infallible in nature since *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* is an apostolic letter, which is not a *mechanism* for infallible papal announcements.<sup>28</sup> What is more, the RCC’s current position on women’s ordination is more varied and nuanced than the cited Magisterium statements may suggest, at least in respect of diaconal ordination.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, §9.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, §29.

<sup>21</sup>Wallace, ‘Catholic Women’, 28–29.

<sup>22</sup>Peterfeso, *Transgressive Traditions*, 37.

<sup>23</sup>Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 142.

<sup>24</sup>Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores*, §5. The document emerged at the time of the first ordinations of women in the Episcopalian Church and the growing ordination movements in the RCC in the United States – and was possibly a response to these shifts. See Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 142.

<sup>25</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, §4. The following year, Cardinal Ratzinger, as Prefect of the CDF, as he then was, wrote *Responsum ad Propositum Dubium* in which he clarified that the Church’s position in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* was a teaching that requires ‘definitive assent’ and belongs to the deposit of faith. See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Responsum ad Propositum Dubium*. According to Cindy Wooden, Cardinal Ratzinger declared that the teaching was in fact infallible. See Wooden, ‘Vatican: Attempted Ordination’. In addition, in his 2002 *Decree on the Attempted Ordination of Some Catholic Women*, Ratzinger held that ‘the teachings of the supreme pontiff on doctrines to be held definitively by all the faithful are irreformable.’ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Decree on the Attempted Ordination*, §2.

<sup>26</sup>Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 145.

<sup>27</sup>McElwee, ‘Vatican’s Doctrinal Prefect’.

<sup>28</sup>Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 145.

<sup>29</sup>There are two types of diaconate, namely the permanent and the transitional, the latter of which leads to priesthood. Zagano focuses specifically on the permanent one arguing that, if women cannot be ordained as deacons because it potentially opens up the issue of their ordination to priesthood, then the permanent diaconate should be possible. See Zagano, ‘Women Deacons’, 77. See also Zagano, *Women: Icons of Christ*.

In this regard, it is worthwhile to note steps taken by the current Pope, Francis. Two particular steps are noteworthy. First, in 2016, he instituted a commission to study the issue of women deacons in the RCC.<sup>30</sup> The Commission was, ultimately, split in respect of its findings, especially concerning the nature of the diaconal ordinations that took place. Significantly, unlike his predecessors, Pope Francis, encouraged the study of the issue of women deacons to continue.<sup>31</sup>

A second important step that Pope Francis took was to institute a Synod on Youth in 2018. Whilst the issue of the ordination of women itself was not mentioned in the final Synod document, the youth called for women's greater participation in the leadership structures of the RCC. The Exhortation by the Pope that followed the Synod document, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Christus Vivit*,<sup>32</sup> did not address this specific call. The relevant clauses are however phrased in a manner that is of such breadth as to permit ongoing interpretations that may be more liberal in nature in the future. The perspectives and concerns of women in the Church are also supposedly being given more attention at the ongoing Synod entitled 'For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission' (2021–2023).<sup>33</sup> At the very least, Pope Francis has provided an opportunity for discussion on matters relating to women to continue and the sense of the faithful to emerge on this issue unlike the two previous popes, and despite official proclamations of the Magisterium in respect of the ordination of women. On the other hand, it should not be overlooked that he officially reaffirmed the ban on women's ordination when on 1 June 2021, he codified the RCC's position in canon law in respect of penalties for attempted ordination of women.<sup>34</sup>

The exclusion of women from both the diaconate and the priesthood is, on the one hand, canonically clear, but, on the other hand, it is certainly not an entirely closed subject insofar as wider ecclesial dynamics and theological discourse are concerned. When asked about the lack of definition of priestly ordination in the revised canon law, Bishop Juan Ignacio Arrieta, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, tellingly replied that law reflects current church teaching, and 'if we come to a different theological conclusion, we will modify the norm.'<sup>35</sup> What is more, the canonical position is not a position that is currently accepted

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<sup>30</sup>McElwee, 'Francis Institutes Commission'.

<sup>31</sup>McElwee, 'Francis Women Deacons'. In 1975, the Papal Theological Commission and the Pontifical Biblical Commission were commissioned to study the role of women in the Church, including the issue of ordination. The latter commission found that the scriptures were ambiguous on the matter. The CDF, however, dealt with the matter authoritatively in the 1976 Declaration *Inter Insigniores* and effectively ignored these findings. See Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 142.

<sup>32</sup>See Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*.

<sup>33</sup>General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops, 'For a Synodal Church', §7.

<sup>34</sup>See Zagano, 'New Canon'. Even more significantly, shortly before the publication of the current article, in an interview with America. The Jesuit Review (November 28, 2022) the Pope ruled out, not only the possibility of female ordination but also the possibility of female ministry. Drawing on an oversimplified juxtaposition of the Balthasarian categories of the Petrine and the Marian principles, Pope Francis defined ministry as being reserved for men alone. See Francis, 'Exclusive: Pope Francis'. By doing so, he effectively ignored the voices of thousands of women from around the world who have heeded his call to embrace the 'Culture of Encounter' among Catholics where the all the faithful were invited to meet one another in a sacred space of mutual regard and where prejudices and rigid positions were supposed to be set aside in an effort to fully engage with and listen to 'the other' - something that he described, on many occasions, as an integral part of the Synodal Process. One is left wondering to what extent the Pope's informal statements will preempt discussions taking place during the continental phase of the Synodal Process in March 2023.

<sup>35</sup>Bishop Juan Ignacio Arrieta, 1 June, 2021, quoted in Zagano, 'New Canon'.

throughout the RCC. As theological scholarship on the matter continues to be delivered, organisations like Women's Ordination Worldwide, Voices of Faith, and Call to Action consistently call for the ordination of women, and the RCWP movement continues (illicitly yet in the apostolic succession) to ordain women despite the Church ban and its canonical implications.<sup>36</sup>

It should be noted that the issue of the ordination of women as deacons and priests are entwined. To separate one from the other is to adopt a simplistic approach. Both kinds of ordinations are being lived through the RCWP movement, and both are currently prohibited by the RCC, even though it has recently (re-)opened the conversation concerning ordaining women as deacons.<sup>37</sup> Spiritual considerations reflected in this study naturally lend themselves to the issue of diaconal ordinations. For practical reasons, however, the scope of the paper has been narrowed to the issue of priestly ordination.

## 2.2. Arguments for and against the ordination of women in the RCC: an overview

Theological arguments in the debate about the ordination of women in the RCC have been discussed at length by several authors.<sup>38</sup> Here it seems justifiable to, at least, point to the main trajectories in this controversy, which will also serve to illuminate the reasons why the debate in question has reached a dead end.

Anne Clifford identifies three major arguments through which the RCC justifies its position that women cannot be ordained to priestly or episcopal ordination validly, namely: (a) the long-held Church tradition of not ordaining women; (b) the witness of scripture; and (c) the religious symbol of '*in persona Christi*.'<sup>39</sup>

The first argument in effect maintains that, since ordination of women has never taken place in the RCC and the Eastern Catholic Traditions, it means that the Holy Spirit is opposed to it.<sup>40</sup> In fact, the Church's tradition has remained so firm on this position over the centuries that no need existed to make any pronouncements on it or 'defend a law that was not challenged.'<sup>41</sup> It is, therefore, tradition itself that precludes any possibility of the ordination of women.

The second argument holds that Jesus must have deliberately not entrusted the 'apostolic charge' (manifested in priestly ordination) to women since he did not choose women to be part of the twelve apostles, especially in circumstances where

<sup>36</sup>The CDF decreed that those women who attempt ordination and those that attempt to ordain them are excommunicated automatically. See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *General Decree*, §2. Archbishop Raymond Burke stated that RCWP was a 'new and separate sect.' See Catholic News Agency, 'Vatican Decrees'. However, he was not acting on behalf of the CDF in stating so, nor ostensibly maintaining that the perceived sect was not Catholic. The penalty of automatic excommunication (referred to as *latae sententiae* excommunication) does not, for example, remove one's baptism as a Catholic. It does not 'put one outside the Church.' See Fresen, 'A New Understanding', 30. It means rather that an excommunicated person is 'forbidden to have any ministerial participation in celebrating the sacrifice of the Eucharist or any other ceremonies of worship whatsoever,' to 'exercise any ecclesiastical offices, ministries or functions whatsoever or to place acts of governance,' etc. *CIC*, §1331.1; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Decree on the Attempted Ordination*, §4.

<sup>37</sup>The second commission on the female diaconate, created by Pope Francis, started its work in September 2021.

<sup>38</sup>See e.g. Waller, 'A Critical Survey'; Ryan, *Loving Fiercely*; Raming & Müller, '*Contra Legem*'; and Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*.

<sup>39</sup>Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 143.

<sup>40</sup>Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores*, §6.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, §8.

Jesus broke numerous customs and empowered women.<sup>42</sup> As a result, the apostolic charge expressed in priesthood is reserved for men.

The third argument holds that in the celebration of the Eucharist the priest acts in the role of Christ ‘to the point of being his very image.’<sup>43</sup> It is required, therefore, that the priest be male: ‘For Christ himself was and remains a man.’<sup>44</sup> Sacramental theology undergirds this position: the priest is a sacramental sign since sacramental signs extend to both persons and things; further, since such signs must easily be recognised as such by the faithful, the same ‘natural resemblance’ to Christ is required, that is, a priest must be a man.<sup>45</sup>

Each argument can be (and has been) countered in turn. For example, in respect of the first argument concerning tradition, some argue that historical evidence exists that demonstrates that women at the very least served as deacons.<sup>46</sup> Based on the feminist deconstruction of historical and scriptural sources, it could also be argued that, rather than the fruit of discerning the movements of the Spirit, the intention of the RCC to close the diaconate to women – just like the one about introducing the mandatory celibacy for priests in the eleventh century – was a matter, primarily, of practical (not least economic) considerations related to leadership and the distribution of power in the Church.<sup>47</sup>

In respect of the second argument, the following two basic responses may serve as an illustration. First, in considering Jesus’ treatment of women, sight must not be lost of the fact that Jesus did not ordain anyone, male or female, as ordination is understood today (nor was he himself ordained).<sup>48</sup> Ordination is a development within the history of the RCC.<sup>49</sup> Second, the choice of male disciples by Jesus should not be read as ‘limiting’ such a role to the male gender. Various reasons possibly exist for such a choice. Apart from obvious cultural factors, Clare Carbone suggests, for example, that the choice may have been intended to dismantle a male understanding of power and thus the underlying patriarchal structures of the society, back then as well as now.<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, one of the leading Catholic theologians of our day, elaborates on the same insight:

Through the lens of women’s experience, the crucifixion of Jesus mounts a tremendous critique against patriarchy. Here is the very ‘Word made flesh’ (Jn 1:14) brought to a tortured death by state power, pouring himself out in self-sacrificing love. This event is the exact opposite of the exercise of male dominating power. In light of the cross, feminist theologians reflect that sociologically it was probably better that the incarnation happened in a male human being. For if a woman had preached compassion and given the gift of herself even unto death, the world would have shrugged: is this not what women are supposed to do anyway? But for a man to live and die like this in a world of male privilege is to challenge the patriarchal ideal of male domination at its root. The cross is the *kenosis*, the self-emptying, of patriarchy.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., §13.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., §26.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., §27.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>See e.g. Zagano, ‘Women Deacons’, 73; and Macy, ‘Women Deacons’, 9–36.

<sup>47</sup>See Geere, *Feminist Ecclesiology*, 27–28. See also Johnson, ‘Jesus and Women’, 22; and Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, xx.

<sup>48</sup>Rakoczy, ‘Special Report’, 26.

<sup>49</sup>Macy, ‘Women Deacons’, 32–36.

<sup>50</sup>Carbone, ‘A Theological Key’.

<sup>51</sup>Johnson, *Abounding in Kindness*, 222.

Thus, in the light of his teachings and particularly his death on the cross, it is justifiable to ask whether Jesus really meant ‘to forever establish a male-dominated system of power within the Church?’<sup>52</sup>

In respect of the symbolic notion of ‘*in persona Christi*,’ Karl Rahner among others pointed out that it is not clear that ‘a person acting with Christ’s mandate and in that sense (but not otherwise) *in persona Christi* must at the same time represent Christ precisely in his maleness.’<sup>53</sup> Rakoczy notes that this understanding of the male biological sex as determining Christ’s identity is a new Christological heresy.<sup>54</sup> Women too can image Christ; otherwise, as Zagano notes, sacramental theology is reduced to a ‘physicalism that denies the mystery of the incarnation.’<sup>55</sup> Zagano argues further that the notion of the priest as (being present) ‘*in persona Christi*,’ which excludes women, is based not on the fact that women cannot image Christ, but rather that they cannot represent the Church’s patriarchal understanding of priesthood.<sup>56</sup>

### 3. The emergence of RCWP as ‘another path in the Catholic Tradition’

RCWP commenced formally with the ordination of seven women from Germany, Austria, and the United States on the Danube River, in the German region of Bavaria. ‘The Danube seven’ were ordained to Catholic priesthood in apostolic succession by male Roman Catholic bishops. The ceremony took place on June 29, 2002. It was presided over by Romulo Antonio Braschi of Argentina,<sup>57</sup> an independent Catholic bishop, and witnessed by some 200 family, friends, supporters and journalists.<sup>58</sup> The subsequent *ordinatio sub conditione* (‘subject to condition’) by an anonymous Czech Bishop, who was legally within the Roman Catholic Church, was kept in private.<sup>59</sup> Evidently, while the women were prepared to disobey the RCC’s teaching, proceeding without apostolic succession was not an option for them.<sup>60</sup> The Danube ordination remains, however, to be seen as a founding event for RCWP. Maya Mayblin explores it from an anthropological perspective: ‘In order to be sacramentally valid, the women’s ordination had to draw strength from the Church’s most sacred office... [It] could not risk being regarded a mere imitation of a rite of ordination ceremony, it had to be a genuine repetition – a material extension of the original rite.’<sup>61</sup>

On October 20, 2002, two of the ‘Danube seven,’ Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger and Dr Gisela Forster, were ordained as bishops by three unnamed canonical male bishops in

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<sup>52</sup>Carbone, ‘A Theological Key’.

<sup>53</sup>Rahner, *Concern for the Church*, 43.

<sup>54</sup>Rakoczy, ‘Special Report’, 26.

<sup>55</sup>Zagano, ‘Women Deacons’, 82.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid. See also Zagano, *Women: Icons of Christ*.

<sup>57</sup>The second ordaining bishop was Ferdinand Rafael Regelsberger of Austria. Though validly ordained, neither man was in communion with Rome at the time.

<sup>58</sup>See Peterfeso, *Transgressive Traditions*, 138, 144; and Mayblin, ‘The Ultimate Return’, 133.

<sup>59</sup>Mayblin clarifies that, ‘in a belt-and-braces approach, all seven women were later reordained *sub-conditionis* – a technical term meaning that the second ordination would be valid only if the first one was not. The second ordination took place in a secret ceremony at a secret location, presided over by a Czech bishop who – unlike the bishop Braschi – was legally within the Roman Catholic Church. The identity of this Czech bishop remains to this day a well-guarded mystery. In order to verify that the second ceremony did in fact take place, a signed witness account that contains his name and identity has been locked away in a closed archive that can only be accessed after the bishop’s death.’ Ibid., 136.

<sup>60</sup>Peterfeso, *Transgressive Traditions*, 77.

<sup>61</sup>Mayblin, ‘The Ultimate Return’, 145.

a private ceremony that took place in Pettenbach, Austria.<sup>62</sup> The episcopal ordinations ensured that the ordination of women would continue since these women bishops could in turn ordain other women as deacons and priests.

The seven ordained women were subsequently excommunicated in 2003 following a series of their interactions with the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith.<sup>63</sup> The RCC's Magisterium considers their ordinations as both illicit and invalid, since they are in breach of canon law.<sup>64</sup> In the eyes of RCWP, however, their ordinations remain valid since the women bishops were ordained by a male bishop in good standing with the RCC. As such, they stood in valid apostolic succession so as to be able to confer validly the sacred orders on others.<sup>65</sup> To use the terminology suggested by Mayblin, Norget, and Napolitano,<sup>66</sup> the fact that the male bishop secretly ministered the sacrament of the priesthood to the women can be read as an instance of the “cannibalization” of the core by the periphery – a cannibalization so potentially successful that it had to be interrupted by the Vatican with a decree of excommunication.<sup>67</sup> ‘Cannibalisation’ is understood here in terms of *generating strength through auto-consumption*: The core drawing force from the peripheries by absorbing (consuming) them and/or the peripheries drawing force from the core by coercing its power. The latter scenario can be applied to the relationship between RCWP and RCC.<sup>68</sup>

The next significant stage of growth of the movement emerged from the priestly ordination of an eighth woman in 2003, namely Patricia Fresen, a religious sister in the Dominican order and theologian from South Africa.<sup>69</sup> She was ordained in Spain and later, after expulsion from her religious community, settled in Germany. She commenced her priestly ministry by taking responsibility for the RCWP's programme of preparation through which she personally trained and prepared many women for ordination.<sup>70</sup> Fresen was ordained as bishop in 2005. This ordination was significant. It meant that an English-speaking woman had been ordained bishop who could now ordain women in English-speaking countries. The movement then shifted and took root in the United States of America where it grew exponentially. As bishop, Fresen has ordained many women as deacons and priests mainly in the USA commencing in 2006, and others in countries like South Africa as recently as 2019 and 2021.<sup>71</sup>

RCWP is a movement that took a ‘defiant new step’<sup>72</sup> in history by actually ordaining women within the Roman Catholic rite and Tradition. It emerged from a long history of internal remedies having been exhausted so that the last resort was ‘simply to ordain.’<sup>73</sup> Responding to what they experienced and recognised as God's calling, those women decided to live out their priestly vocation, and to do so as Roman Catholics, despite the

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<sup>62</sup>Peterfeso, *Transgressive Traditions*, 77–78.

<sup>63</sup>Cordero & Thiel, *Here I Am*, 15.

<sup>64</sup>CIC, §1024. See also Peterfeso, *Transgressive Traditions*, 184.

<sup>65</sup>See Cordero & Thiel, 44. Technically speaking, according to the RCC's canon law, ‘to be valid only a laying on of hands in direct apostolic succession is required, to be licit the ordinand should be a baptized man.’ Mayblin, ‘The Ultimate Return’, 135.

<sup>66</sup>Mayblin et al., ‘Introduction’, 1–32.

<sup>67</sup>Mayblin, ‘The Ultimate Return’, 146.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>See Cordero & Thiel, *Here I am*, 18.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>72</sup>Peterfeso, *Transgressive Traditions*, 127.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 117.

Magisterium's official ban and condemnation of their ordinations as invalid. Commenting on this lived praxis approach, one of the Catholic womanpriests speaks of a 'lived theology' based on the shift 'from the level of [theoretical] theologising into a spirituality of affirming Goodness.'<sup>74</sup>

Peterfeso holds that a key external force that contributed to the rise of the women's ordination issue in the RCC, was the ordination of women that took place in the Episcopalian Church in 1974. This is when eleven women were ordained in apostolic succession, *unlawfully yet validly*, as was claimed, by retired Anglican male bishops. The ordinations were initially condemned by the Episcopalian House of Bishops, but two years later they were legalised.<sup>75</sup> When RCWP emerged formally in 2002, it in effect followed the same pattern: it commenced with the ordination of seven women on the Danube River, which was carried out in apostolic succession by male Roman Catholic bishops.<sup>76</sup> The difference in the Catholic context is that the ordinations have not been legalised to date.

Even though they generally align 'theologically, politically, socially and intellectually with any number of liberal-leaning other Catholic or mainstream Protestant churches,'<sup>77</sup> the members of RCWP chose not to leave the RCC. Not surprisingly, they have been, from the beginning, confronted with the question of whether they should not 'simply begin their own church or shift allegiance to a religious denomination that accepts women as priests [such as the Anglican Communion]?'<sup>78</sup> Minney's exploration of the calls of Catholic women to priesthood reveals the varied responses given by the womenpriests to such a question. For example, RCWP priest Monique Venne maintained that, to leave and join another denomination would be 'dishonest,'<sup>79</sup> whereas another womanpriest, Mary Kusner, stated that she wanted her presence to speak louder than her absence.<sup>80</sup> Ida Raming pointed out that, while 'for some, like the hierarchy, women priests are a spiritual uprising, for millions, the time has come for a holy shakeup that brings new life, creativity, and equality to our church.'<sup>81</sup> Womanpriest Caryl Johnson indicated, in turn, that despite the pain she experienced through the Church's exclusionary practices and beliefs, her 'love for the church ran just as deep.'<sup>82</sup> It was that love, deeper than logic, that led her 'to *stay and walk another path in the catholic tradition*.'<sup>83</sup>

As a worldwide renewal movement within the RCC, RCWP aims to re-shape the Church from within to create an 'inclusive, Christ-centered Church for the twenty-first century.'<sup>84</sup> The broad intention of RCWP is succinctly captured as follows: 'We are loyal members of the church who stand in the prophetic tradition of holy obedience to the Spirit's call to change an unjust law that discriminates against

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<sup>74</sup>Meehan, *Living Gospel*, 82.

<sup>75</sup>See Peterfeso, *Transgressive Traditions*, 110–114.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 138, 144.

<sup>77</sup>Mayblin, 'The Ultimate Return', 135.

<sup>78</sup>Minney, *Called*, 26.

<sup>79</sup>Peterfeso, *Transgressive Traditions*, 51.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup>Ida Raming, quoted in Mayblin, 'The Ultimate Return', 134.

<sup>82</sup>Johnson [C.C.], *My Journey*, 13.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*, 36 [our italics].

<sup>84</sup><http://www.romancatholicwomenpriests.org/NEWhistory.htm>

women. We are obeying well-formed and well-informed consciences.<sup>85</sup> The Constitution for RCWP-USA (Inc) was ratified (in its amended version) on April 2, 2012. It sets out the vision as follows: ‘A new model of ordained ministry in a renewed Roman Catholic Church.’<sup>86</sup> As a non-profit organisation, RCWP-South Africa defines its goal in terms of supporting ‘a new model of ordained ministry within an international movement in the Roman Catholic Church.’<sup>87</sup>

#### 4. An alternative ecclesiological model: a challenge and a gift to the Church ensnared in patriarchy and clericalism?

Terms used by scholars to describe the type of dissent represented by RCWP, and to differentiate it from schism, include ‘productive dissent,’<sup>88</sup> ‘faithful disagreement,’<sup>89</sup> and ‘loyal dissent.’<sup>90</sup> As a cultural anthropologist, Mayblin observes that, by ordaining women, RCWP ‘broke the traditional template laid down for ordination to the Catholic priesthood, even as it displayed a certain faithfulness of form to the rite of ordination.’<sup>91</sup> ‘What is striking about this kind of dissent’ – she further asserts – ‘is that it neither aligns with maintaining the status quo or with what could be seen as radical change, but rather with changing the course of repetitions themselves and bringing to light a continuity that was there all along.’<sup>92</sup> While we have found this anthropological account of the movement very helpful, another aspect of Mayblin’s study struck us as more questionable.

Analysing the public performances and private attitudes of the members of the movement, Mayblin characterises their dissent as bold and challenging on the one hand and yet ‘camouflaged in gendered forms of humility and obedience’ on the other hand.<sup>93</sup> She even speculates that ordained women have embodied ‘a paradoxical ethics of *deep protectiveness* for the flawed institution that will not contain them.’<sup>94</sup> Observing recent trends within the movement, including the social presence and activism of its members in the Global South (notably South Africa), one could argue, however, that this is not the case.<sup>95</sup> We believe that the ambivalence inherent in ordained women’s desire for public recognition stems not so much from the tension between ‘stability’/obedience and ‘unruliness’ that Mayblin scrutinises in her study, but rather from their deliberate choice to, prophetically, dwell ‘*on the edge of the inside*’<sup>96</sup> in terms of their ‘critical

<sup>85</sup>McGrath et al., *Women Find a Way*, 2.

<sup>86</sup>RCWP-USA, *Constitution*, article 1. In 2010, RCWP-USA has split. A group broke away – under the leadership of a (then) RCWP’s bishop Bridget Meehan – and formed a new organisation called the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests (ARCWP). The core difference between RCWP and ARCWP lies in certain areas of governance. See Peterfeso, *Womanpriest*, 59. It should be noted, however, that members of both groups tend to downplay such formal discrepancies, or even view the status quo as favourable, since it demonstrates – in their opinion – that the movement ‘allows for cultural differences and different ways of being [a] church. *Ibid.*, 62. Speaking of the co-existence of the two movements, one of the womenpriests used the analogy of a ‘federation’ that can accommodate various regional needs. *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup>RCWP-SA, *Constitution*, article 2.1.

<sup>88</sup>McDonough, *Beyond Obedience*, 228.

<sup>89</sup>Kaufman, *Why You Can Disagree*.

<sup>90</sup>Curran, *Loyal Dissent*.

<sup>91</sup>Mayblin, ‘The Ultimate Return’, 134.

<sup>92</sup>*Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup>*Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>95</sup>See e.g. Bertelsmann, ‘Faith is a Feminist Issue’; and Willman, ‘Feed My Sheep’, 83–94.

<sup>96</sup>Rohr, *Eager to Love*, 34.

allegiance' to the Catholic Tradition. The extent to which direct critique against the RCC is mounted by the RCWP members differs across cultural and ecclesial contexts and is dependent on generational and societal factors. While the instances of '*deep protectiveness* for the flawed institution'<sup>97</sup> can be identified, this kind of 'paradoxical ethics' does not seem to define the form of dissent represented by RCWP essentially.

In the paragraphs that follow, we attempt to foreground the pivotal aspects of RCWP's subversive praxis *vis-à-vis* the RCC's entanglement with patriarchy and clericalism. We do so by offering a brief account of the key legal, pastoral and sacramental facets of the RCWP's alternative ecclesiological model which Peterfeso describes in terms of a 'pragmatic, pastoral, priesthood ministry.'<sup>98</sup>

RCWP's egalitarian and communitarian model of the church encompasses the movement's alternative approach to priestly formation, ordination and ministry, the reinterpretation of the linkage between celibacy and priesthood, and the emphasis on the active participation of the entire community in the celebration of the sacraments. It also fosters radical inclusiveness which stands in stark contrast to the RCC's exclusion<sup>99</sup> of several groups from full participation in the life of the church, on both sacramental and institutional levels. These groups include women, LGBTQI+ people, divorced persons and laity at large as well as representatives of other Christian denominations and different religious traditions. RCWP's model of the church is underpinned by the kenotic and circular view of the community.<sup>100</sup> While maintaining the orders of deacon, priest and bishop, the group *de facto* effectuates a shift towards a democratised model of the church as 'people-empowered discipleship of equals.'<sup>101</sup>

Regarding its organisational structures, emphasis is placed on consultative decision-making where lay members have as much actual right to express their voices as the priest in a community. The priests themselves make decisions based on consensus, and conflict is managed with the assistance of experts forming a 'Compassion Circle,'<sup>102</sup> and by following a *Code of Ethics*.<sup>103</sup> Use of a majority vote is by way of exception if an agreement cannot be reached. The National Compassion Circle Policy and Protocol, which is the key tool in managing conflicts, emphasises servant leadership.

The organisation as a whole is currently comprised of over 250 members, which includes priests, deacons, candidates and bishops. Womenpriests are highly educated, the minimum qualification requirement being a Master's degree in theology. Many hold doctorates in theology. There is significant diversity among the group: some live vowed lives of celibacy, whilst others are married, single, widowed, divorced, and have children. There is variety in terms of sexual orientation as well. The RCWP members are either

<sup>96</sup>Rohr, *Eager to Love*, 34.

<sup>97</sup>Mayblin, 'The Ultimate Return', 143.

<sup>98</sup>Peterfeso, *Transgressive Traditions*, 365.

<sup>99</sup>In some cases, like with divorced people, this exclusion may be disguised as a 'conditional inclusion'. In others, it tends to be more straightforward, like in the case of women not being allowed to partake in church leadership and decision-making processes where they matter most (i.e. the ongoing Synod). Even here though, it is often intentionally 'diluted' with rhetoric about women's *actual* importance in the church related to their 'Mary-like' identity epitomising 'church as spouse', and often to the resulting call to obedience, service, charity work, or - like in the latest remarks made by Pope Francis - to administrative involvement in the church structures. See Francis. 'Exclusive: Pope'.

<sup>100</sup>Delio, *Making All Things New*, 121.

<sup>101</sup>Meehan, *Living Gospel*, 68.

<sup>102</sup>RCWP-USA, *Constitution*, article 7.

<sup>103</sup>RCWP-USA, *Constitution*, article 12.

retired or working to earn an income. Womenpriests are referred to as ‘worker priests’ since RCWP does not support them financially.<sup>104</sup>

Meehan succinctly describes the work of many among the womenpriests: ‘Ministering in home churches, hospices, college chapels, local street ministries with the poor,’ where the vision of an inclusive Church is primary, and where all gifts are equally valued.<sup>105</sup> It is a model in which all are seen as members of caring communities of equals. In its ministry, RCWP emphasises solidarity with those on the margins, which takes the form of personal and public support for anyone who experiences discrimination of any kind, including based on race, gender and sexual orientation. The pastoral dimension of the sacrament of priesthood is closely related to what Peterfeso describes in terms of ‘performative power.’<sup>106</sup> Through its ‘public performances’ such as ordinations, the movement uses a performative dimension of worship ‘to enter public discourse, to claim space and engage or incite conflict, and thereby to assert or maintain identity.’<sup>107</sup> This performative power renders *real* the sense of belonging for those who can no longer find their place in the RCC (for instance, due to its sexism or homophobia), but who are also not prepared to deny their Catholic identity altogether.

By situating the celebration of the sacraments at the centre of community life and by emphasising that ‘all are welcome to receive the sacraments,’<sup>108</sup> RCWP holds a significant *sacramental power* to re-envision and reinforce more inclusive and egalitarian relationships.<sup>109</sup> Sacraments are offered in renewed ways that demonstrate God’s ‘radical, inclusive love.’<sup>110</sup> The sacrament of marriage, for example, is extended to gay and lesbian couples.<sup>111</sup> As for the Eucharist, the entire community is seen as the celebrant, and the ‘real presence’ refers primarily to the presence of Christ in the Eucharistic community.<sup>112</sup> The community has, therefore, the collective or participatory power to consecrate bread and wine in the celebration of the Eucharist. In this regard, the priest does not hold unilateral power, but only facilitates the celebration. In addition, the priest does not stand higher than the people: the community gathers around the table and speaks the words of consecration; the priest receives communion last, and the community members pass the cup to each other. RCWP thus returns and entrusts the gift of the sacrament to the *authority shared* between the priest and the gathered community.<sup>113</sup>

A further – and arguably the most transgressive – step currently is the celebration of the Eucharist remotely, that is, through live online gatherings in which the priest and online community participate in the consecration of bread and wine that each member brings to the celebration.<sup>114</sup> Once again, the *lived praxis* approach of RCWP focuses on ensuring that the spiritual needs of the faithful are met, even though some insist that there are many unsettled theoretical issues which require further debate. Several

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<sup>104</sup>Peterfeso, *Transgressive Traditions*, 36.

<sup>105</sup>Meehan, *Living Gospel*, 68.

<sup>106</sup>Peterfeso, *Transgressive Traditions*, 12.

<sup>107</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>108</sup>Meehan, *Living Gospel*, 22.

<sup>109</sup>Peterfeso, *Transgressive Traditions*, 394.

<sup>110</sup>Johnson [C.C.], *My Journey*, 37.

<sup>111</sup>Peterfeso, *Transgressive Traditions*, 230.

<sup>112</sup>Meehan, *Living Gospel*, 144.

<sup>113</sup>See Peterfeso, *Transgressive Traditions*, 4, 185, 208.

<sup>114</sup>See [www.romancatholicwomenpriests.org](http://www.romancatholicwomenpriests.org) for details of such Masses.

communities adopted this practice during the COVID-19 pandemic; some have decided to continue with online gatherings as a more inclusive format for a Eucharistic celebration.

While sacraments remain a deeply spiritual act celebrated by the community of believers, womenpriests deliberately allow them to play another role as well, namely that of a publicly performed political action.<sup>115</sup> RCWP ‘acknowledges and utilises women’s bodies as signifying agents, communicating a vision for social change and enacting that idealised future in the present moment.’<sup>116</sup> Phair considers such use of sacramental rituals by the Catholic womenpriests as a type of ‘argument’ in their (usually one-sided) interactions with the RCC’s male hierarchy; yet she sees it as clearly ‘distinct from the discursive rhetoric’<sup>117</sup> which, in her view, has proven incapable of resolving the conflict between the movement and the Church’s Magisterium.

## 5. RCWP’s subversive praxis *vis-à-vis* RCC’s doctrinal impasse: concluding thoughts

Severe problems that currently face the RCC include the crisis of sexual abuse (which has exposed both the demoralisation and impunity of the Catholic clergy all over the world and caused a tremendous violation of trust towards the institutional Church); rampant clericalism (continuously criticised by Pope Francis himself); the growing gap and polarisation between Church teachings, academic theology and *sensus fidelium* (especially in matters related to sexuality and gender); and the persistent (or in some cases increasing) alienation of the laity which results in the growing indifference or even apostasy, and the consequent lack of new vocations in many parts of the world.<sup>118</sup>

Commentators like Lucetta Scaraffia, an Italian historian, suggest that many of those challenges could be avoided or mitigated if it wasn’t for the RCC’s stubborn exclusion of women’s perspectives on key issues such as marriage and family.<sup>119</sup> The Synods held in 2014 and 2015 in the Vatican provide a case in point. Even though a small number of women were allowed to participate in both Synod sessions, none of them had the right to vote. ‘Since the Catholic Church continues to refuse to ordain women, all decisions were made by bishops and a few heads of male religious orders.’<sup>120</sup> In fact, the second Synod showed ‘that being a man in Church decision making is [even] more important than ordination,’ as one of the men, Brother Hervé Janson, superior general of the Little Brothers of Jesus, though not ordained, was nonetheless a voting member. The fact that a synod discussing marriage and family included no women as decision-makers, Scaraffia concludes, ‘is not only an act of disdain towards women who make up more than half of religious and believers, it is also an impoverishment of Catholic life.’<sup>121</sup>

Through living a renewed model of priesthood in the Catholic Tradition, RCWP seeks to offer a tangible response to a doctrinal impasse on the issue of women’s ordination that the RCC appears to have reached in 1983. By doing so, it strives to ‘save’ the male

<sup>115</sup>See *ibid.*, 9.

<sup>116</sup>*Ibid.* 166.

<sup>117</sup>Phair, ‘Ladies and Liturgy’, iii, 64–83.

<sup>118</sup>See Peterfeso, *Transgressive Traditions*, 246.

<sup>119</sup>Lucetta Scaraffia, quoted in McElwee, ‘Catholic Women’.

<sup>120</sup>Rakoczy, ‘A Gendered Critique’, 15.

<sup>121</sup>Lucetta Scaraffia, quoted in McElwee, ‘Catholic Women’.

hierarchy *from themselves*, to awaken them to the truth about the universal nature of Christ's priesthood and help them embrace the practical implications of that truth. As such, the movement sees itself as 'a sign of renewal for the church, not against it'.<sup>122</sup>

Authors like Krista Phair have previously pointed out that the use of illicit ordination and refusal to accept excommunication is what distinguishes RCWP from several movements for ordination that preceded it, none of which 'have garnered so virulent a reaction from Rome as the RCWP'.<sup>123</sup> She has further suggested that the conflict between the RCC and the RCWP is unlikely to be resolved 'through discursive means',<sup>124</sup> and identified 'the use of sacramental rituals' by the Catholic womenpriests as an alternative type of 'argument' on their part: '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 . . . This is truly a case where actions speak louder than words.'<sup>125</sup>

It may be too early to properly assess RCWP's impact on Roman Catholicism and Christianity at large, and whether or not it is merely *seasonal* in nature. However, the testimonies of its priests and members of their communities suggest that long-awaited change is taking root. What this change really means for the RCC, has yet to be seen. In the light of Richard Rohr's insistence on the need to overbalance a priesthood of 'Holy Orders' with that of 'Holy Non-Orders',<sup>126</sup> it could be surmised that RCWP holds no more than a *transitory space*, as radically new forms of priesthood emerge before our eyes across Christian denominations, churches and communities.<sup>127</sup> This, however, would not necessarily render the movement any less noteworthy.

Even as a *transitory stage* in the evolution of Christianity, the Catholic womenpriests would potentially have a significant role to play. For example, RCWP bishop, Patricia Fresen points out that by no means would the gradual *phasing out* of the ordained priesthood diminish the ethical urgency of the anti-patriarchal struggle for justice today: 'We must not try to jump over this stage of claiming justice, but allow the process to evolve organically.'<sup>128</sup> It remains to be seen whether a 'democratized Church of the future'<sup>129</sup> could ultimately rid itself of the twofold poison of patriarchy and clericalism. But it is clear that, in the meantime, there are only a few who are capable of carrying 'the responsibility . . . to embody and reflect this possibility . . . [indeed] an eschatological vision . . . of transcending sexual prejudice by reforming [the ecclesial] doctrine and practice.'<sup>130</sup> As far as present-day Roman Catholics are concerned, this responsibility appears to rest largely on women-believers, and in a very unique way on womenpriests who – without waiting for a 'doctrinal breakthrough' on part of the RCC's male hierarchy – have claimed their rightful place in a Catholic Tradition.

Indeed, the Catholic womenpriests appear to be better positioned and more inclined to embrace the predicted shift towards the universal priesthood than most of their male

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<sup>122</sup>Allen, 'Seven Women'.

<sup>123</sup>Phair, 'Ladies and Liturgy', 84.

<sup>124</sup>Ibid., iii.

<sup>125</sup>Ibid., 84.

<sup>126</sup>Rohr, *The Wisdom Pattern*, 79.

<sup>127</sup>See Reed & Zbaraschuk, *The Emerging Church*.

<sup>128</sup>Fresen, 'A New Understanding', 30.

<sup>129</sup>Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, 213.

<sup>130</sup>Alvizo & Marti, 'The Emerging Church Movement', 242.

counterparts. Amongst all the challenges that the RCC faces, RCWP womanpriest Marty Meyer-Gad asserts that, while ‘the cracks in the Catholic hierarchical Church widen . . . [this] Catholic Priestly People emerge strong.’<sup>131</sup> As this article sought to demonstrate, RCWP’s *lived praxis* approach implies that – in contrast to the clericalist tendencies of the mainstream Roman Catholicism – the womenpriests prioritise encounter with God and pragmatic ministry over organisational perfection, intellectual uniformity or rigid consistency in the practice of faith. Above all, they seek to be pastors whose primary concern is attending to the needs (spiritual and otherwise) of God’s people *here and now*.

This ultimately explains why womenpriests could not wait for the *men in the Vatican* to figure things out through discursive means (i.e. the only way with which many of them are familiar and by which they feel unthreatened). To use Elizabeth Johnson’s *Noah Principle*: ‘No more prizes for predicting rain; prizes only for building arks.’<sup>132</sup> Today the RCC has found itself, worldwide, under severe critique due to the global crisis of sexual abuse. The flood is here, and RCWP among other renewal movements have their arks already navigating across the tumultuous waters. They refuse to give up on the Church and are prepared to rescue it from ‘those who are right.’<sup>133</sup> It remains to be seen whether Catholicism’s traditionally ‘infallible,’ authoritarian core, embodied by the Vatican and the exclusively male Magisterium, has been hit and shaken hard enough to recognise its being in need of radical transformation and the opportunity presented by the ‘pragmatic, pastoral, priesthood ministry’<sup>134</sup> in the Catholic Tradition, effectuated by ordained women.<sup>135</sup> The question appears particularly relevant at the time when the Roman Catholics around the globe point to clericalism and the place of women in the Church as the two major problems facing the RCC today.<sup>136</sup>

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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<sup>131</sup>Meyer-Gad, *Seventy-Four Cents*, 62.

<sup>132</sup>Johnson, ‘Feminist Christology’, 17.

<sup>133</sup>We are alluding here to the title of the book by Carter Heyward, *Saving Jesus from Those who Are Right*.

<sup>134</sup>See Peterfeso, *Transgressive Traditions*, 365.

<sup>135</sup>Mayblin, ‘The Ultimate Return’, 134.

<sup>136</sup>Zagano, ‘Synod Reports’.

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