

Ordain Women Banner Flies in Rome ***honoring St. Therese of Lisieux and all women called to priesthood***

By Kate McElwee

In celebration of the feast day of St. Therese of Lisieux, a five yard-long purple "Ordain Women" banner was placed on the *Sant'Angelo* bridge, just in front of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The banner stayed in place for nearly two hours before it was removed by authorities.

What I didn't share in our media release was that I was shaking with nerves that morning, as I prepared to drop and attach a banner to the historic bridge, considered an illegal act of defacing a landmark.

I spent the weeks before the action slowly collecting supplies (raising some suspicion with the cleaning supplies store clerk when purchasing seven wooden broomstick handles and two mop handles — the witchy irony is not lost on me, Mary Daly), painting, and practicing the drop off from my terrace with a friend. Walking the mile or so from my home to the bridge early Sunday morning and watching the police patrol the empty streets, every part of me said, "turn back!"

The banner drop in Rome and the many witnesses across the U.S. honored St. Therese and all women called to priestly ordination. Deemed the "Little Flowers of the Grassroots," this day of action brought WOC members in front of churches and cathedrals, holding signs, handing out white roses and "10 Reasons to Ordain Women" leaflets.

A 19th century French Carmelite nun and Doctor of the Church, St. Therese wrote in her journals and confided to her sister Celine her deep desire to be a priest. She wrote: "*I sense in myself the vocation of priest.*" Dying of tuberculosis at just twenty-four, she believed God made her terminally ill, preferring her death over the disappointment and pain of not being ordained with the men when she came of the usual age of ordination at the time.

Therese's story of vocation is often absent from her narrative of a pure "Little Flower," making her a popular model for humility and docility among Catholic groups. Pope Francis himself claims to have a special devotion to her, always carrying her *Story of a Soul* in his suitcase, according to reports. However, a closer reading of her journals and the testimonies of her sister and family members, make clear that her fierce love for God was complicated by a Church that would not honor her priestly call.

The erasure of women's priestly vocations and the issue of women's ordination from Catholic spaces is nothing new. The institutional Church would have us know that there is no need for further discussion, attempting to silence voices with inconvenient questions. Catholic groups take this charge upon themselves in the form of harassment, bullying, "outing," and smear campaigns, threatening the security and livelihoods of fellow Catholic disciples. On social

media, “new feminism” groups use polite pastels and flowers to champion John Paul II’s theology of the body, dismissing feminist questions with traditional feminine fonts.

Even seemingly progressive groups and allies wash their hands of women’s ordination, in the words they use and the company they keep. I wrote about the dangers of “Putting Ordination Aside” in a 2014 issue of *New Women, New Church*, lamenting the trend of working for women’s “incisive presence” in the Church without addressing patriarchal roots. Bowing to hierarchy’s fears of “radical feminism,” this practice of censorship continues today, leaving the issue of women’s ordination as an untouchable “hot button,” behind closed doors.

Sidelining an issue is not simply stopping a conversation: it is silencing and dismissing women and women’s experiences. It hurts individuals, it weakens the Church, and it contributes to oppression in the world. We must name the priestly women we know, like St. Therese. We must champion our pioneers who lead prophetic lives. We must stand by women who take great risks to answer their call.

Perhaps we are now at a place where the conversation can happen more freely. Pope Francis encourages fearless dialogue at the highest levels of the Church. With the formation of the commission to study women deacons, Pope Francis has given permission to discuss the possibility of ordaining women (as something).

Dialogue is one step. Taking action gives us movement.

So inspired by the people of WOC who for more than four decades have taken risks for what is right, I walked across the bridge. Much bigger and taller than it seems, my friend and I hoisted the banner over our heads and threw the contraption across the ancient stones. Securing our message with brand new ropes, we walked away.

The banner appears so small and home-spun compared to the enormous backdrop of the Basilica. Someone on Twitter joked that this was the size of our movement (tiny), but to me, it is the space the institution has created for women (tiny and off to the side, please). But this tiny hope, this “Little Flower,” is a sign that the grassroots are empowered. People of God are not content with simply admiring the structures of patriarchy. The “Little Flowers” are in bloom.

I believe Therese would be proud of the work of WOC. I wish she could know you, and our courageous members who celebrate her vocation and work tirelessly to re-center women, amplify their voices, and celebrate their ministries.