

Catholic Women's Ordination—The Long View

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for WOC's 50th Anniversary Conference, Detroit, MI

May 23, 2026

Introduction

Good evening and thank you for a very generous introduction. Many thanks to the organizers, WOC staff and board, speakers and liturgists. Thanks to all gathered to celebrate WOC's first fifty faithful, creative, fabulous years. Special thanks to the IHM Community for hospitality as their spirit is all over the Marygrove campus.

Let us celebrate our many successes in bringing about a more just, loving, and verdant world. Despite wars raging and rights annulled, the greening that Hildegard of Bingen envisioned in the 12th century is flowering in movements like WOC for inclusion, participation, democracy, and joy.

Let us take a moment to meet someone new and thank them for their part in this unfinished movement of the Spirit we call WOC.

I am honored to explore "Catholic Women's Ordination—The Long View." First, I outline my own experience, then I highlight what I think we have accomplished, and finally, I look gratefully to our colleagues in the women's suffrage movement for inspiration as we persist.

We are not engaged in a short campaign for ordination. That ship sailed. Rather, we celebrate the generations of women with trans and non-binary colleagues and a few good men, for whom ordination is still an injustice to correct. However, time teaches that the ordination struggle is a gateway to Hildegard's greening that is fully in progress. It is the needs of the world and not the failings of the church that set our agenda.

I. My Experience in the Movement

As a cradle Irish Catholic, brought up in the 1950's in Syracuse, New York, ordination was not among my career choices. In the mid-1960s, a priest who taught religion at Bishop Ludden High School confidently assured the girls in my class that only men could be ordained. We girls discussed this after class. In our 15-year-old wisdom, we concluded how wrong he was. He became the school's principal, a high dollar fundraising monsignor. He was eventually defrocked after being credibly accused of sexually abusing an altar boy. We were right.

I went on to study Theology and Philosophy at Marquette University in 1969, and then to Harvard Divinity School in 1972 where I was part of the first sizeable cohort of women students. Most of them were brilliant and creative Protestants preparing for ordination and jobs with paychecks and pensions. That was new to me. The other Catholic and I were preparing for academic careers, blissfully ignorant of the ministry. Rosemary Radford Ruether taught at Harvard then. Mary Daly was nearby at Boston College writing *Beyond God The Father*. So, I picked up the basics of feminism from those friends and mentors by osmosis by the age of 23.

I went on to theological doctoral studies at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, in the fall of 1974. I lived initially at the Episcopal seminary (Church Divinity School of the Pacific) which I had chosen sight unseen. I mistakenly thought it would be a hotbed of feminism because the first eleven U.S. Episcopalian women had just been ordained, validly if illicitly, on July 29, 1974. Imagine my chagrin when some of the women in my dorm preferred not to discuss that watershed event for fear of endangering their own chances for ordination. One said she was keeping her head down to get through seminary. Those first women priests had their ordinations regularized in September, 1976. Pity help those poor souls who cowered in the face of their sisters' courage.

In the fall of 1975, word spread in Berkeley about a Women's Ordination Conference in Detroit. I was engaged in feminist activities through GTU's Office of Women's Affairs. The name was later changed to protect the guilty as we loved to

boast! A local Catholic woman, Judy Whitehead, said although she could not go to Detroit, she wanted to give a scholarship to someone from Berkeley. I was chosen and jumped at the chance. I praise her name today. Pay it forward.

I received gracious hospitality from the Religious of the Sacred Heart in Detroit. I attended the conference like a sponge, soaking up the people and ideas, passions and pains. Who could forget the session when those who felt called to ordination were invited to stand? We young ones sat on the floor to give chairs to our elders in the crowded room. I remember kneeling since I wanted to see who stood. It was exhilarating to know that there were women bold and insightful enough to make their callings public.

In retrospect, I think we **all** should have stood, not because we all wanted to be ordained to a clerical, celibate, hierarchical priesthood. Rather, we all should have stood because what was at stake then, as now, is a much larger struggle to guarantee every person the right to choose and fulfill their vocations to the best of their ability for the sake of the world.

The non-ordination of women, as the great feminist biblical scholar and WOC collaborator Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza named it, is a symbol and an example of the many ways women and non-binary people, immigrants, people of color, and those with disabilities are systematically marginalized. In the 14th century, Catherine of Siena declared: "Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire." Anything that stands in the way of doing what one feels called to do diminishes the whole world. We won't stand for it.

II. What we have accomplished despite the non-ordination of women

I have been around WOC since the beginning, sometimes as an advisor though never on the Board or Staff, except during a cold February 1982 in Rochester, New York when I volunteered.

Since 1983, when Diann Neu and I started WATER, we have collaborated consistently with WOC through the Women-Church Convergence. One memorable protest, "Women's Rights are Human Rights" was at the Vatican

Embassy in Washington on August 26, 1987. A dozen of us were arrested. WOC Founding Director Ruth McDonough Fitzpatrick proclaimed: ["We will not accept men telling women they can't be priests because that's the way God wants it; She does not!"](#)

In the 1990's, WOC lobbied the bishops at their annual meetings in Washington. We loitered in hotel lobbies, greeting bishops, and urging them along. A few bishops were supportive, including one into whose consecrated hands we thrust a camera to take our picture, this being pre-selfies. He obliged.

Ruth and I visited the vestment suites in the hotel where bishops would shop for finery in their free time. Some Dutch companies brought especially beautiful robes and mitres. It was shocking for the Dutch salesmen to see women trying on their wares.

It was equally shocking for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to find pumpkins (jill-o-lanterns, perhaps?) with painted faces, pigtailed, and mitres on their headquarters' wall on Halloween morning several years running. Ruth was an excellent artist. We left the gentlemen beautiful samples of her pumpkin artwork.

No one lasts long in this movement without a robust sense of humor. We laugh at the absurdity and call out the colossal stupidity of not welcoming all who wish to serve.

The installation of the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Sarah Elisabeth Mullally, underscored our apparent lack of success compared with the achievements of our Anglican siblings. But we have accomplished more than our mission as our many efforts bear the abundant fruit that Mary B. Lynch and colleagues planted decades ago.

What have we achieved?

1. *Our faithful, sustained, varied, creative, and generous work has changed the face of institutional Roman Catholicism.*

The refusal of patriarchal officials to make needed changes in structure and polity, combined with the worldwide clergy sexual abuse scandal, has left the institution weakened to the point of irrelevance. It is tarnished as a source of moral wisdom at a time of global peril. Pope Leo's anti-war/anti-nuke rhetoric notwithstanding, imagine how much **more** powerful Catholic non-violence claims would be if they came from a credible institution.

Saint Sr. Theresa Kane, of blessed memory, in her historical welcome to Pope John Paul II on October 7, 1979 at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC, laid out women's willingness to serve "in and through the Church as fully participating members." The failure of decision-making men to embrace this generosity astonishes and scandalizes to this day.

The Spirit moves on. More than a billion Catholics **are church** in no uncertain terms and without apology. We now have women and non-binary priests and ministers, who, with the rest of us, are busy meeting the needs of the world not fretting about the failures of the church. The day will come when those in high office regret the error of their ways. They will come to our grandchildren to ask forgiveness which we would grant them **today** if they ask us and change their ways. Meanwhile, our energies are trained on stopping war, ending racism, ableism, sexism, and poverty, safeguarding the planet, and ministering to those in need. We are busy.

2. Ordination as we knew it in 1975 is a different sacrament today. Think of your own call to ministry, perhaps your ordination, and the many ways you minister to the needs of the world. Contrast your training with that of young male seminarians who are still educated like hot house flowers, far from the company of women and non-binary people, and limited to a narrow curriculum. My studies in interreligious and non-religious settings, my Clinical Pastoral Education in a women's prison, and my several years of living and teaching in Argentina during a dictatorship were preparation for meeting the needs of the world as a scholar and as an activist.

Catholic lesbian, bisexual, queer women have a more difficult path than our cis gay male brothers who are in the vast majority in their circles. Women who

live beyond the heterosexual norm were the first intersectional challenge to the women's ordination movement. To our movement's collective credit, we were met for the most part with hospitality and respect despite what I know is still some trepidation about the movement being seen as queer. More intersectionality is incumbent upon us, especially with people of color and young people who must be accorded the same welcome.

Women, especially queer women, have been the canaries in the coalmine on ordination. We experienced early the need to move beyond the institutional church. In a May 2026 discussion hosted by the Women of Dignity and the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER) entitled "Catholic Lesbians and Queer Women Look at Women's Ordination— Roles, Contributions, and Expansive Options," two lesbian women described their ordinations.

One, a former WOC staff, spoke about accompanying her beloved father at his deathbed in 1983. A male priest was invited to offer the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. The priest said, "Hello, my name is Ed and I am a priest." Her father, near death, replied, "Nice to meet you and so is my daughter." With good reason, she considered that her ordination. Her powerful artistic and social change work is proof that when you are doing your God-given work, you set the world on fire. Thank you, Marsie Silvestro.

Another lesbian woman priest spoke of her **three** ordinations (sort of like Mary Daly's three doctorates—no flies on the high achieving lesbians!). Her first ordination involved *religious* disobedience. In 1988, she was asked to preside at a Mass with New York Dignity in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral during the HIV/AIDS pandemic. She was also arrested for *civil* disobedience in New York City protesting the infamous 1986 "Halloween Letter" in which Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger defined homosexual orientation an "objective disorder" and an inclination toward "intrinsic moral evil." That is still official church teaching, our abundant healthy love notwithstanding.

Her second ordination was as part of a "priesthood of all believers" who founded "A Critical Mass: Women Celebrating the Eucharist." That group fed

homeless people in the park near the earthquake-damaged Oakland Cathedral in California, and then celebrated Eucharist with all.

Her third ordination was in 2005 by Roman Catholic Women Priests bishops and the community assembled on a boat on the St. Lawrence Seaway. She called it a symbolic reinforcing of her already priestly work. She 'priests' with style. Thank you, Victoria Rue.

So it goes that women rejected by patriarchy create and find new ways to meet the needs of the world.

3. *Another achievement is our impact on ordinary Catholics.* [Recent Gallup Poll data](#) informs that: "After years of declining religiosity, the percentage of young men saying religion is very important in their lives and reporting attendance at religious services rose markedly between 2022-2023 and 2024-2025. This has resulted in a reversal of the gender gap among young adults on the importance of religion and a rare tie in their religious attendance." It is not surprising that young women are leading the way out the door, nor that patriarchal power is attractive to young men, especially conservatives.

So much for religion being consigned to the domestic sphere and women taking the kids to church. Perhaps among the small percentage of 'trad' Catholics that remains true. But young women and young men (no report on non-binary people) are moving in opposite directions. Our achievements compel young people to give serious thought to affiliating with a patriarchal religious tradition given many other good religious options.

III. *Thanks to the women's suffrage movement for inspiration as we persist*

As we look ahead, what might we expect? That is for young people to decide and I defer to them. We heard some good ideas in the panel on this topic here at WOC's 50th Anniversary conference. However, history also teaches important truth.

The play "Suffs" reminded me of parallels between the struggle for the right for some women to vote, and our ordination struggle. In 1920, white

women, and far too much later Indigenous, Asian, Black, and Brown women gained suffrage. Recent Supreme Court actions threaten to reinscribe Jim/Jane Crow era dynamics, but the constitutional right to vote is clear.

Three insights from suffrage struggles apply to us at WOC:

1. White women made mistakes: they left women of color on the margins of the movement; they fought one another over the right way to proceed; but it took all of their efforts to get it done. Once they won the vote for white women, many turned their attention to the Equal Rights Amendment and to civil, especially voting, rights for people of color. Racism remains strong nonetheless.

We, too, have made many mistakes. U.S. white women have learned that our experiences, our faith, our families are not normative especially in an increasingly diverse global church growing fastest in Africa and Latin America.

We have learned that nuns are not privileged in our movement. They are dedicated lay women like the rest of us. They must beware of the pseudo-clerical cooptation that the patriarchal church would visit upon them by tokenizing some, especially in administrative positions.

Ordination does not equal administration. Administrative jobs are a way to keep women from being ordained. The Vatican learned that some women are very gifted at organizing. Think of this movement that did not have five cents in 1975, but has changed the face of Catholicism worldwide as women study theology, train for ministry, run institutions, and many manage to have partners and families and fun. I would hire women too, women who can stretch a dollar and share abundantly.

But until and unless all ministries and all positions are open equally to persons of all sexes and genders, our work is unfinished.

2. A second lesson from the Suffrage movement is that our work is not a quick fix for a single problem. It is the work of our lives, generations from cradle to grave, for which the bonds between/among us are as important as the outcome and the outcome is far more than women priests.

The suffrage campaign lasted 72 years, from the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 to the Ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920. Many who envisioned the goal, including Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, were long dead and the young people of the movement aged into graceful old women. Sound familiar?

Those of us here this weekend who attended the 1975 conference as young people are not dinosaurs but relics. Some of our siblings here today will, by the grace of God, celebrate WOC's centennial whether women are ordained by then or not. Why? WOC's mission is "to advocate and pray for women's ordination as deacons, priests, and bishops into an inclusive and accountable Roman Catholic Church." That is a worthy project which may not be finished even in another fifty years. But it is what the Divine invites in us, with us, and because of us in service of a safer, fairer, greener world that matters.

3. Finally, "Suffs" shows the human dimensions that underlie any movement for change. Suffrage leader Alice Paul dedicated herself body and soul to the movement in a laser-focused way although she was a bit of a pain in the neck. Other women got sick and died trying. We have lost many along our way, some to old age, some to broken hearts as their dedication was rewarded by stones not bread. All of us challenge and fortify one another.

Like our suffrage sisters, sometimes we are driven wild by the demands of purists or by the compromises of those who practice expediency. We know those people; we can be those people! But the bottom line is that the vote was not won by one strategy, nor will ordination be won by one path. There is no one, right way to justice. There are many, varied, sometimes seemingly contradictory strategies. Viewed from the far side of the moon, as we now can, the differences fade and the struggle is really one. The bonds between/among us are what endure in epic struggles like suffrage and ordination. These struggles require commitments of a lifetime and generations of people to bring about not a single goal but a transformed Earth.

Conclusion

The great womanist theologian the late Rev. Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon advised: **“Do the work your soul must have.”** WOC’s mission is the work our souls must have. Tonight is for celebrating and dancing, and we have ample reason to do so. Tomorrow, as our WOC fore sister and staff member Dr. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz wrote, “La Lucha Continues,” *The Struggle Continues*.

That struggle was already won by our ancestors. It is won over and over and over again by each person and each generation that collaborates in the work of love and justice. Then, and only then, can the flame of Pentecost set the world on fire as Catherine of Siena imagined and we experience.

Thank you, blessed be, burn on.