

Female Priest Defies the Catholic Church

In San Diego, Jane Via leads a Mass by herself. She is facing possible excommunication

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CORRECTION: SEE CORRECTION APPENDED; Women priests: Articles in the Aug. 11 and Aug. 14 California section about women who were "ordained" to protest the male-only priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church reported that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops had not taken a formal position on the issue. In 1994, the conference supported an apostolic letter by Pope John Paul II reaffirming ordination of men only. But the conference has not taken a formal position on the recent series of ordinations, leaving the matter to local bishops. Also, the Women's Ordination Conference became a nonprofit in 1975, not last June as reported in the Aug. 14 article.

Jane Via said she would probably cry and, sure enough, she did.

Midway through her homily at the rented San Diego church used by her upstart congregation, Via choked up, thanking the packed house of 100 worshipers for sustaining her over the last week.

Sunday's service was the second Mass that Via has led since her illicit ordination in Switzerland in June, and the first over which she has presided alone.

It also marked her congregation's first gathering since she met with San Diego Bishop Robert Brom to discuss the consequences of her ordination, which could ultimately include excommunication.

Via, 58, is among 15 American women who have received ordination in recent ceremonies.

Unlike the Episcopal and Anglican churches, which now allow women's ordination, the Catholic Church bars women from becoming priests or deacons.

The Vatican's position on women entering the priesthood has not budged, despite polls showing a majority of American Catholics favor allowing them to do so.

A Roman Catholic canon says only baptized men can receive ordination.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has not taken a formal position on the issue, but three of the American women have received letters from diocese officials warning that they had chosen to excommunicate themselves.

Via called such consequences "unwelcome," but also, in a sense, liberating.

"I was so angry for so long at the church and church men who weren't willing to make even the smallest change in language to include women," she said. "My anger is gone."

Last November, Via co-founded the congregation where she is a priest, the independent Mary Magdalene Apostle Catholic Community. Its roughly 65 regular members include many people who found themselves increasingly discontented with aspects of mainstream Roman Catholic churches.

Dan Dinan said that, with two daughters and four granddaughters, he had always been bothered by what he saw as women's second-class status in the church. In Via, a married mother of two who is also a deputy district attorney for San Diego County, he sees an ideal pioneer.

"She's not a radical, she's not far out," he said.

Many of those at Sunday's service said they had been drawn by the news of Via's ordination. Perhaps as many as 20% of the attendees were newcomers, including Alfred O'Brien, who usually attends one of two Catholic churches near his La Jolla home.

O'Brien said he blamed recent scandals in the Catholic Church partly on the absence of female leaders.

"There was no one around the foot of the cross when Christ died except women," he said. "Women are the backbone of the church. That's why I'm here. It's long, long overdue."

Most attendees were well aware of Via's tenuous position with church officials. All said her stature would remain unaltered in their eyes even if she were excommunicated.

"It would be painful, in the sense that the church can be that narrow, but it doesn't stop us from going forward," said Sandy Trybus, a congregation member and one of Via's longtime friends.

Trybus accompanied Via to Switzerland for her ordination and said that Via had anticipated an official reaction to what she was doing.

Dinan said publicity about Via's situation might have an upside, attracting non-Catholics looking to champion women's rights.

"I resent people who say love it or leave it," Dinan said of the Catholic Church. "We're not going to leave it. We're going to change it."