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The Rebel Priests

These women say they're heeding a call to the altar. The Vatican says they're committing a sin as serious as pedophilia. The 75 American women who have been ordained as Roman Catholic priests knew they faced excommunication—but it was a price they were prepared to pay to change the church they love from within

by Julia Duin

Monique Venne

Photograph: Jean-Francois Campos

Monique Venne started saying the Roman Catholic Mass at her family's oval kitchen table when she was nine years old. It was 1966, and on days when she couldn't play outside after school, Monique and her seven-year-old sister, Janine, gathered in the warm kitchen of their home in Stoneham, Massachusetts, just north of Boston. Monique would carve out a round piece of white bread and flatten it. That served as the Communion wafer, which she'd place on an avocado-green glass plate. Then she would pour grape Kool-Aid into a matching green goblet. That became the chalice of Communion wine. For the Mass, Monique dipped into her trove of memorized Latin phrases. But, she says, "we didn't light candles, as we were not allowed to use matches."

At school, she opted to skip the noon recess in favor of attending Mass so she could enjoy the real thing. Dressed in her green plaid parochial school uniform, she sat in the front pew. Only boys could be altar servers, reciting the responses and ringing a set of bells at key intervals, but often the boys wouldn't show up, so Monique quietly chanted the responses and clapped her hands when the bells were supposed to be rung. "I thought of myself as a pious Catholic kid," she remembers decades later. "I sang in the children's choir because that was the only way a girl could participate in the liturgy."

In eighth grade, she toyed with becoming a nun, then discovered boys. She married, got a master's degree in meteorology and spent 15 years in that field, first as a meteorologist at Northwest Airlines in Minneapolis and then at two small research firms. But through it all, she volunteered at her church. "I was always involved in some sort of liturgical ministry," she says, serving as a Eucharistic minister (helping the priest serve Communion), sacristan (in charge of the ceremonial robes and equipment) and altar server (by then, women were allowed on the altar). Occasionally she'd lead morning prayer on weekdays. "I was always happiest near the altar," she says. "I have a deep love of liturgy."

By age 41, she was burned out on her profession. Providentially, she was laid off at the same time. She enrolled in a United Church of Christ seminary, just north of Minneapolis, with the idea of earning a theological degree that would qualify her to publish Bible study guides for Catholics. In 2002, while at the Protestant seminary, she had a chance conversation with some Catholic priests and mentioned how she'd celebrated pretend Masses as a child. “They told me that these experiences were considered to be the first call to priesthood,” says Venne, a thoughtful-looking woman with short brown hair and green eyes. “I was floored! I was both joyful and bitter: joyful that I had this calling and bitter that the Roman Catholic Church would not acknowledge my calling because of what I was—a female.”

Coincidentally, 2002 was a year of great import for Catholic women longing to be ordained. That's when a group of seven from several countries decided to become priests in spite of the church's position that females are prohibited from this path because Christ chose only male disciples. Like other Catholics, these women believed in apostolic succession, the idea that priestly ordinations are valid if the bishop who performs the rite can trace his ecclesiastical lineage back 2,000 years to the original 12 apostles. The women found two such bishops willing to conduct the ceremony, which took place June 29, 2002, on a boat on the Danube River. (Diocesan boundaries don't include international waterways, so the location ensured that no church authority could block the ceremony.) The bishops used the same rites that are used for male candidates, and the women took the same vows, prostrating themselves as men do when they are being ordained.

The Vatican declared the rites “invalid and null” and excommunicated all seven women, who became known as the Danube Seven. As for the bishops, Rome considered them already excommunicated because they were part of independent Catholic groups that did not have Vatican approval. Still, the bishops had been validly ordained, and the seven women made the case that their ordination was equally valid because it was performed in accordance with the doctrine of apostolic succession. Once a priest is consecrated as a bishop, he retains the power to ordain others, even if he gets excommunicated, they claimed. A year later, three bishops, all in good standing with the church but whose identities have remained secret, consecrated two of the Danube Seven as bishops, which allowed them to begin ordaining priests themselves. Over the past 10 years, these two female bishops have been actively ordaining, with the result that, worldwide, 124 women now call themselves priests and 10 call themselves bishops. Of those, 70 priests and five bishops are American.

Venne heard about the Danube Seven, and when she graduated with a master of divinity degree in 2004, she began mulling over whether she, too, should become a priest. But she also knew that ordination would inevitably lead to excommunication. “I had a great fear of that,” she says. It would place her outside the safe spiritual zone she had occupied her entire life, relegating her to the status of Protestants and others outside the church and possibly put her beyond salvation as well. The threat of this exquisite spiritual torture, whereby the offender faces damnation unless she repents, kept her longings in check.

“The church sees excommunication as a medicinal penalty,” says Father Thomas Reese, a Vatican analyst for the *National Catholic Reporter*. “Once you do the right thing and promise good behavior, the excommunication is lifted.” But repentance would not be an option for a woman who chose to become—and remain—a priest.

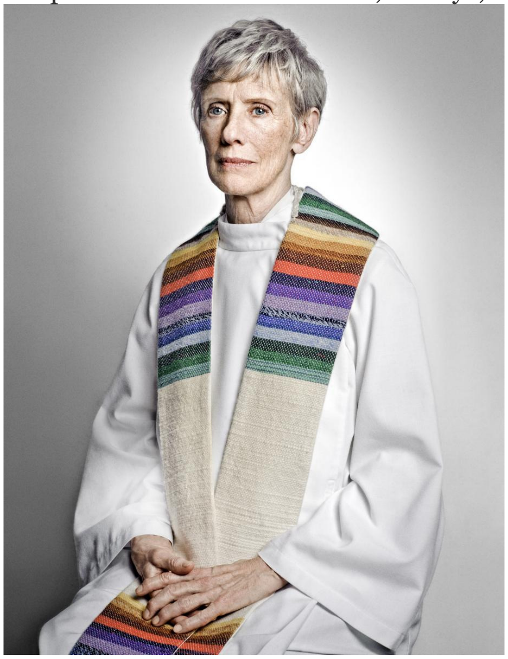
Venne decided to brave the threat. In 2007, she witnessed the ordination of two women—one of them a friend—who had overcome their personal terror of excommunication. “Their faces expressed deep joy and no fear of the consequences,” she says. “Seeing that convinced me I had nothing to fear. A month later, I began the application process.”

Working through the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests (ARCWP),one of the two main U.S. groups that promote and facilitate female ordination (the other is the much larger Roman Catholic Women priests, or RCWP–USA), Venne became a priest on June 26, 2011. Now 55, she copastors a Minneapolis congregation of about 20 that rents space in a Methodist church. The position is part time, and she and her husband live on his salary as a college professor. She officiates at weddings; organizes the worship service for her congregation, Compassion of Christ; serves on the national board of the RCWP–

USA; and is the administrator for the RCWP's Midwest region. "What continues to fill me with gratitude is that God never withdrew my call to be a priest when I first didn't recognize it and later suppressed it," she says. "When I had the ability to acknowledge my calling, it was still there, as fresh as ever."

Pauline Cahalan, 68, a charter member of Venne's congregation, attends a traditional Catholic church as well as Compassion of Christ and regards both as her spiritual home. "I have a fundamental disagreement with the Roman Catholic Church's position that women and married men can't be priests," she says. "We get our vocation from the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit doesn't discriminate between men and women. To me, this is all about men's egos. The bureaucracy of the Catholic Church is so threatened by the thought that women would have any power. The older I get, the less I am buying this. I keep going to Compassion of Christ because we have to support the women who are taking these risks. I think we are groundbreakers for something that will hopefully broaden as time goes by."

That may take a while. In 2008 the Vatican announced that any woman who is ordained—as well as anyone who tries to ordain a woman—would automatically be excommunicated through a process called *latae sententiae* (Latin for "sentence passed"). As a result, Venne never got an official excommunication letter because there was no need for it. The church did excommunicate Roy Bourgeois, a 75-year-old Maryknoll priest who openly supports women's ordination and has taken part in at least one ceremony. Other male priests have been threatened with excommunication. "For the Vatican and the bishops, this is an issue of authority," says Reese. "For a priest who has promised obedience to his bishop to be involved in ordaining a woman or supporting it—that's a total flouting of the hierarchy's authority." The Vatican also doesn't believe it can change the rule about ordaining only male priests even if it wanted to, he says, because "it's what Jesus did."



In 2010 the Vatican turned up the heat on its campaign against female priests by proclaiming that attempts to ordain women were a *delicta graviora,* a grave crime against the church—the same designation applied to priests' sexual abuse of children. According to Reese, "the Vatican was not saying the two 'crimes' are equally evil. Rather, it would be like saying that rape and stealing an automobile are both felonies under American law." Still, nearly every woman interviewed for this article professed stunned amazement at the comparison. "You see so much outrage against the women," says Mary Ann Schoettly (image right), 70, of Newton, New Jersey, who has been a priest for four years. "You don't see as much passion expended against pedophile priests." In the U.S., no priest has been excommunicated for sexually abusing a child, nor have any of the bishops who conspired to hide criminal priests from the police. But according to Pete Vere, the author of two books on canon law, the church would not excommunicate a priest who is sorry for his actions. "The proper response is to strip [him] of [the] priesthood," he has written. To date, 325 priests accused of sexual abuse are known to have been laicized (i.e., defrocked).

Since ordination for women automatically results in their excommunication, it seems as if they might do better to join a different tradition—Episcopal, for example—that would welcome them as priests. But for these women, that easier path holds no appeal. As one woman priest puts it, "The Catholic Church is my church, even though it doesn't claim me." And leaving doesn't serve the mission of the rebel priests, which is to reform—from within—what they see as dysfunction in today's Catholic Church. They want the priesthood to be open not just to women but also to married, divorced and gay people. They want a new theology in which God can be referred to in the feminine as well as the masculine and which allows the laity, not just the priests, to say the words of consecration over the bread and wine at Mass. Because of these goals, leaving is not an option for them.

But it is for others. About 30 million American Catholics have left the church, including many who would support such innovations, according to a 2008 Pew Forum study. Among Catholics who haven't left, there is strong support for women's ordination. A *New York Times*/CBS poll taken in February found that 70 percent of Catholics want the new pope to allow women to become priests. That number is up since 2010, when the same poll found that 59 percent of American Catholics favored the ordination of women. William D'Antonio, a fellow at the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies in Washington, D.C., placed the number at 62 percent in a survey he led in 2011. "The Catholic public all over the country has accepted us," says Suzanne Thiel, 64, president of the RCWP-USA, which is active in 30 states.

Still, none of the ordained women operate out of their own church building or earn a living through priestly work (male priests receive a salary as well as a housing allowance from their parish, diocese or religious order). Most of the women priests oversee fellowships of two to three dozen people who gather in private homes, synagogues or churches belonging to other denominations. A few women priests in cities such as San Diego and Cincinnati preside over groups of 75 people or more. The priests hold outside jobs or live on pensions, Social Security or a husband's income. If they worked as a teacher or chaplain at a Catholic institution before -ordination—a school or hospital, for example—they were forced to quit when they became priests. "Once you take that step [of ordination], you can no longer work in a formal Catholic capacity," says Erin Saiz Hanna, executive director of the Women's Ordination Conference in Washington, D.C., a group that lobbies for female Catholic priests. The church's adamant position on this issue has deterred many younger women from seeking the priesthood. Fewer than a handful of the 70 American women priests are under 45.

Some women become bolder as they get older. Like Monique Venne, Mary Ann Schoettly, the New Jersey cleric, played priest as a child. She served Communion in her garage at age six, using pastel-colored Necco candies as Communion wafers and dolls as her congregation. "Only men can be priests," her mother chided her, though she didn't try to stop her daughter from celebrating pretend Mass. "I buried the dream of becoming a priest," says Schoettly. She went into teaching, getting three master's degrees, in biology, theology, and administration and supervision. She married, had three children and became an adjunct theology professor at the College of Saint Elizabeth, a Catholic institution in Morristown, New Jersey, and an adjunct biology professor at Assumption College for Sisters in Mendham, New Jersey. "There was always an underlying call to serve as a priest," she says. "So I did what other Catholic women did: I participated in church activities in any way I could." Then, after meeting female priests at a 2006 conference of Call to Action, a group that promotes reform within the church, Schoettly, 64 at the time, decided to work toward ordination.

Both the RCWP-USA and the ARCWP require women to have a master's degree in theology or divinity, and ministerial experience. (In general, male aspirants must have a master's in divinity from a Roman Catholic seminary.) Candidates must then complete a series of study units (mostly about the sacraments and priestly calling) before being ordained as deacons, the first step to the priesthood, followed by more study and training leading to ordination. Candidates choose a male or female priest as a mentor who oversees the study program and evaluates the candidate's research papers. A local priest teaches them to perform the sacraments of Communion, anointing of the sick and so on.

Schoettly's adult son, a practicing Catholic, supported her ordination. "He said, 'Mom, if that's what you want to do, go ahead. It's fine with us,' " Schoettly says. "My daughter-in-law said, 'Well, our generation thinks it's about time!' " Schoettly's former husband (they divorced in 1993) went to her ordination, and she says her pastor was privately supportive at first. "I'd been his RCIA [Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults] director," she says. But, according to Schoettly, after a front-page story about her ordination appeared in the *New Jersey Herald*, the local bishop called her pastor and forbade him to give her Communion. "Then came a public rant from my pastor at Sunday Mass, nasty letters to the editor in several newspapers, skepticism from friends, church acquaintances avoiding me in the local stores," she says. "But none of them had any power over me."

Schoettly became a priest in 2009 at age 67 and gave up her teaching positions at both Catholic colleges ("I resigned because I knew they'd be told to let me go"), her RCIA post and a volunteer job at a Catholic retreat center. Schoettly now copastors a congregation of about 35, the Sophia Inclusive Catholic Community, which meets weekly at a community center in Sparta, New Jersey. Like the faithful who attend other churches led by female priests, its members have a menu of reasons for choosing Sophia instead of a traditional parish: disagreement with Catholic teachings on abortion or birth control, the lack of married or female priests, the impersonal nature of the typical parish of several thousand members, the continuing sexual-abuse crisis, fear that conservatives are doing away with the reforms of Vatican II or a patchwork of all these complaints. If Sophia did not exist, its members would most likely fade into the tapestry of people, many thousands of them, who were Catholic until their faith took a hit and never recovered. “The members of my parish could not find what they needed in other traditions,” says Schoettly. “They lost their spiritual homes, and I experience a sense of fulfillment knowing that I have had a role in the healing that has taken place within each person.”

In June 2010, Schoettly and seven other women traveled to St. Peter’s Square in Rome to take part in a demonstration supporting women’s ordination. Wearing her clerical collar, she held aloft a large purple banner that said ordain catholic women. The demonstrators were soon detained by uniformed Italian police and papal police in plainclothes. “They questioned us, took our passports and removed any pictures of them from our cell phones and cameras,” she says. “We went back the next day; they literally ripped the banner out of our hands.” Which was OK, she adds, because the media filmed and photographed the entire event.

A year later, several other women priests demonstrated in St. Peter’s Square, among them Donna Rougeux (image right), an intense 53-year-old whose decision to join the ministry was inspired, in part, by the Vatican’s decision to place ordained women in the same crime-against-the-church category as pedophile priests. A convert at age 22, she says, “I’d fallen in love with the Catholic Church because there were so many good things about it.” After teaching for seven years in a Catholic elementary school, she married, had three children and sank her energies into working on the start of a new parish. She served on multiple committees and became a Eucharistic minister. “I helped give birth to that church,” she says. At age 44, she felt drawn to the Disciples of Christ seminary in her hometown of Lexington, Kentucky, and earned a master’s in pastoral studies there. The degree, which she got in 2009, helped her qualify for her present job as a hospice chaplain, but she wanted more. When the Vatican came out with its 2010 *delicta graviora* proclamation condemning female priests, “I was heartbroken and outraged,” she says. “On a whim, I Googled ‘women priests’ and found the Roman Catholic women-priests movement. I knew it was the answer to my struggles.”

Rougeux began to prepare for ordination. Soon after becoming a deacon in 2011, she flew to Rome for the St. Peter’s Square demonstration. The Associated Press ran photos of Rougeux in her deacon’s robes next to a large sign proclaiming, in English and Italian, god is calling women to be priests. Despite a letter from the local bishop urging her to desist, and her husband’s opposition (he is a conservative Catholic), Rougeux was ordained a priest by one of the five women bishops in the U.S.—Bridget Mary -Meehan—in Lexington on June 9, 2012.

Rougeux and her husband are now separated. “I think if I’d stopped when I became a deacon, he might have hung in there,” she says. “He did stick his neck out for love of me, but [in the end] he just could not go there.” (She is quick to say that becoming a priest is not a marriage killer and that many female priests she knows of are happily married.) “Becoming a priest gave me the strength to face something I’d been ignoring for years,” she says. “My marriage was very unstable, insecure. Becoming a priest saved me from a slow death on the inside.” Rougeux now pastors a fellowship of 14 people that meets in a private

Lexington home. “The establishment is sick and dysfunctional, and they have a lot of power and money and control, and they’re going to use everything they have to shut you down,” she says. “There’s huge suffering that goes with rocking the boat. In the Bible, prophets suffer for their cause. It just goes with the role.”

The suffering can last beyond the grave. Jane Via, 65, says for her an especially painful consequence of being ordained is that she will not be allowed burial in a Catholic cemetery. A hazel-eyed woman with a warm, welcoming manner, Via is one of the better-known faces in the movement. A retired San Diego County prosecutor, she oversees Mary Magdalene Apostle Catholic Community in San Diego, one of the largest Roman Catholic churches led by a woman priest, with about 90 people attending each week. Via was ordained in June 2006 by three bishops (Gisela Forster, Patricia Fresen and Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger) on a boat on Lake Constance, near Switzerland. “I wanted to start a parish for driven-away Catholics like my husband, for fallen-away Catholics like my children and divorced and remarried-with-no-annulment Catholics like so many colleagues in my law office,” she says.

San Diego Bishop Robert Brom heard about Via’s ordination and requested a meeting with her. According to Via, he asked her to admit to certain ecclesiastical violations over the phone; she says she responded, “I have a PhD in theology and a law degree, and I can’t respond to your questions without knowing which text you are relying on.” Via and the bishop each arrived at their August 2006 meeting with a lawyer in tow, unsure what to expect. She felt anxious, but in the end, she says, they had a “civil” meeting. According to Via, “He explained why he had to refer my case to Rome, and I said I respected his position. He said, ‘In the age of the Internet, Jane, it is not that the Vatican doesn’t know what is going on here. If I don’t do my job, they will replace me and find someone who will do it.’ I was shocked by how direct the chain of command is from Rome to a bishop in as faraway a place as San Diego, California.”

Via’s church grew, and today her community rents space from a Lutheran church in the dry hills of Serra Mesa, a middle-class neighborhood in San Diego. One Sunday evening in November last year, Via celebrates Mass as she always does, standing behind a simple wooden altar, wearing a beige liturgical robe accented by fall colors: red and brown, with yellow stripes on the sleeves. She addresses God as “she” and the “Holy One, the Inclusive One.” Instead of simply watching their priest consecrate the bread and wine, as traditional congregations do, Via’s community members stretch out their hands toward the chalice and together recite the prayer that Catholics believe changes bread and wine into Christ’s body and blood. In the congregation’s reworked version of the Lord’s Prayer, they replace the words *Lord, kingdom* and *Father* with *Christ, kingdom* and *Loving God.*“The first time I attended Via’s Mass, women priests were a novelty,” says Ann Morey, parish treasurer. “Now it’s the new normal.” Terry Jackson, 72, a former priest who married a former nun, says they drive an hour to get there on Sunday evenings. “A lot of progressive bishops believe women should be ordained, but they don’t dare say it. They’re such robots.” Jackson and his wife began attending this church five years ago, and “we fell in love with the inclusiveness and the nonsexist language,” he says. “My wife feels so at home here and delighted with the femininity in the liturgy.”

What these parishioners consider “the new normal” is still anathema to the Catholic Church, which saw a new pope elected in March. None of the women profiled here thought he would initiate big changes. “My modest hope is that Pope Francis will lift the excommunications of women priests and their supporters, such as Father Roy Bourgeois,” says Venne. “However, nothing I have read so far indicates that he is open to ordaining women. So my tempered hope is that he will expand the priesthood to married men. I believe that once that happens, the other groups of people the church bars from ordination will gradually be accepted. But I do not expect to see women accepted into the Catholic priesthood in my lifetime.”

Some women priests have totally given up on the church and have emotionally moved on. One of those is Ree Hudson of Sedona, Arizona. She says that before her ordination on November 11, 2007, the archbishop of St. Louis sent her, via process servers, five documents threatening excommunication. “I don’t give a damn what they say,” asserts Hudson, a retired schoolteacher who doesn’t depend on a Catholic institution for income. “The bishops keep shooting themselves in the foot. Every time they do something against ordination, it helps our cause. It’s only a matter of time. Soon the church as we know it will crumble." Like the other rebel priests, she continues to pray for the church that she hopes and wishes could be.

Julia Duin is the author of *Quitting Church* and *Days of Fire and Glory*.

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