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Ordination puts woman, backers at odds with the Catholic Church

By Sandi Dolbee
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In the packed sanctuary of a rented church in Mission Hills, a balding man in a short-sleeved shirt stepped up to the microphone. “Folks,” he began, “I want to welcome you to the revolution.”

Then came the applause.

As far as the 250-plus people were concerned, they were making Catholic history.

Shortly after 5 p.m. Sunday, Jane Via walked down the aisle to preside over a service celebrating her ordination as a priest. She led the Mass, gave a brief homily and distributed Communion.

Her voice cracked with emotion as she spoke of her ordination a month ago on a boat in Switzerland. But mostly, she was focused. “There are so many Catholics today who can't find God in the church,” she said, adding a few moments later: “It's our job to feed them.”

Via is the new priest of the independent Mary Magdalene Apostle Catholic Community, which describes itself as a contemporary and inclusive congregation and meets every other Sunday evening at Mission Hills United Methodist Church.

Her ordination June 24 was through Roman Catholic Womenpriests, a reform movement that reports it has ordained dozens of women priests and deacons, including 12 this past Monday on a chartered boat in Pittsburgh.

Except the Catholic Church does not allow women priests or deacons (in 1994, Pope John Paul II issued an apostolic letter saying the ban is not up for debate).

It goes almost without saying that the Catholic Church does not consider the ordinations valid nor does it sanction those ceremonies (one conservative lay activist called Monday's ceremony part of a “make-believe



JIM BAIRD / Union-Tribune
Jane Via, with ex-priest Rod Stephens, outside the rented church Sunday. She's part of a movement that says it's ordaining women as Catholic priests.

game”).

And while the San Diego diocese would not comment on Via, the head of a lay-led Catholic education organization said Via has violated church law.

“Not only is she not a Catholic priest, she has incurred automatic ex-communication,” said Karl Keating, founder and president of Catholic Answers in El Cajon.

“Our local bishop doesn't need to come out with an announcement to confirm that Jane and whoever else is involved have removed themselves from the church,” Keating added.

But this does not dampen the enthusiasm of Dan Dinan, the man who welcomed people to Via's service. He's been a Catholic all 75 years of his life and thinks women should be ordained. “What we're doing,” he said, “is transforming the church from the bottom rather than the top.”

■ ■ ■

Jane Via is sitting outside a Starbucks at Horton Plaza. It's less than a week until the celebration service, and she is telling of her conversion to Catholicism.

Via grew up in St. Louis, raised by liberal Protestant parents but longing to have what her Catholic friends had. She became a Catholic her first year of college, finding a church home that offered “the balance of ritual and symbolism and imagery that unlocked religious experience.”

She got her doctorate in religious studies and began teaching at the University of San Diego, where she also earned a law degree. She currently is a deputy district attorney in San Diego.

Via, a soft-spoken, intense woman, is no stranger to controversy. In 1985, she was banned by then-Bishop Leo Maher from speaking at any Catholic forum here because she signed a national newspaper advertisement calling for the church to discuss its stand on abortion. She insists the ban died with Maher, who passed away in 1991.

Over the years, she despaired about the role of women. “It just seemed like things just got worse and worse for women in the church, and I did not see any potential for change.”

In 2002, her husband clipped a newspaper story about a renegade ordination of Catholic women on a boat on the Danube River near Austria. “I was so excited,” she remembered.

She began corresponding with one of the women, and, two years later, she found herself on the same river being ordained a deacon, a level of clergy that allows some religious duties but stops short of allowing officiating at Mass. Via used a pseudonym because her younger son was in a Catholic high school here. “I did not want him to be punished for my actions.”

In 2005, after her son graduated (both her sons are in college now), she began to tell more people and share



JIM BAIRD / Union-Tribune

The sanctuary was full for the "celebration of women's ordination and the ordination of Jane Via." The Mary Magdalene Apostle Catholic Community meets every other Sunday.

a desire to start a parish “for all the Catholics who have fallen through the cracks.” On Nov. 27, 2005, Via's 58th birthday, the Mary Magdalene Apostle Catholic Community held its first liturgy (its service schedule is at www.mmacc.org). At her side then and this past Sunday was Rod Stephens, who resigned his faculties as a Roman Catholic priest in the Orange County diocese in 2004 but still considers himself a priest.

Don't tell Via she's not the real deal.

“I am a Roman Catholic woman priest,” Via said in a firm, calm voice. “We are Catholic, and this is our tradition and we claim it. . . . The institution chooses not to recognize us.”

The lawyer parses words.

“I believe that my ordination is valid. I acknowledge it's illicit under canon law.”

Before leaving for her home and husband in Jacumba, she's asked why she just doesn't go to a denomination that allows women clergy.

“I can't explain that. I only know that I'm Catholic through and through.”

■ ■ ■

Bertha Popeney, a 72-year-old Catholic from La Mesa, couldn't stop smiling. “I think it's ecstatic, just marvelous,” she said of Via's ordination celebration.

Popeney calls Mary Magdalene Apostle her church home now. But even those visiting from other parishes were excited.

“We wanted to come by and show her our support,” said Henry Manriquez, 56, who attends St. Brigid's in Pacific Beach. “It's been long overdue.”

Keating, the Catholic Answers president, has a message for these folks: “I would just say they're mistaken and they ought to conform their minds to the thinking of the church.”

There will never be women priests in the Catholic Church, according to Keating. “The church is not a political operation where with enough votes things are going to be modified.”

In the sanctuary on Sunday was Rabbi Lenore Bohm, a longtime friend of Via's who more than two decades ago became the first woman rabbi in San Diego County. Bohm said afterward she was moved by the service's themes of justice, hope and being welcoming.

“That's what Jane Via as a priest stands for,” she said, “and that is the best that every religion hopes to stand for.”

■ **Sandi Dolbee:** (619) 293-2082; sandi.dolbee@uniontrib.com

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