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Religious Crisis and Civic Transformation

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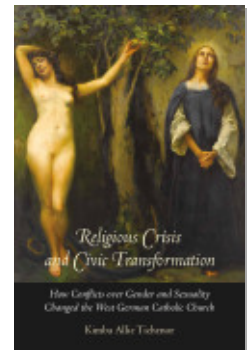
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Women's Ordination Sacramental and Gendered Bodies

The issue of women's ordination cannot be understood in isolation from that of the male celibate priesthood and the symbolic nuptial relationship between the Church and Christ. The idea of the Church as a maternal body and the bride of Christ has always existed within Catholicism, and theologians trace its origins back to the Old and New Testaments.¹ However, in the late twentieth century, this nuptial relationship gained added significance when for the first time it became one of the primary rationales for excluding women from the priesthood.

In Catholicism, the nuptial relationship between the Church and Christ is seen as paralleling the marital relationship between a husband and wife; thus, the theory of sexual complementarity is also applied to this divine marriage. Sexual complementarity defines men and women as equal in their humanity but having gender-specific roles to fulfill in life based on their natural inclinations. According to this theory, motherhood and virginity demarcate woman's contribution to the Church as receptive, passive, and subordinate, whereas man's role is active and authoritative. As the German theologian Manfred Hauke explained in 1986, "The superiorities of men, to express things pointedly, lead to a position of authority, but the superiorities of women to a position of subordination."² Similarly, the Church as bride is subordinate to her bridegroom, Christ.

In 1976, the CDF applied the nuptial metaphor to the priesthood. The CDF argued that a woman could not serve as a priest, because she could not embody the relationship between Christ the bridegroom and his bride, the Church: "Christ is the Bridegroom; the Church his Bride, whom he loves because he has gained her by his blood and made her glorious, holy and without blemish, and henceforth he is inseparable from her. . . . That is why we can never ignore the fact that Christ is a man."³ *Inter Insigniores* introduced a new and explicitly sexualized argument against women priests—one that described "the relationship between Christ and the Church in of-

ten floridly extravagant metaphors of sexuality and procreation.”⁴ Unlike previous arguments, it did not assume women’s inherent inferiority.⁵ In the 1980s, this new argument grew in popularity among opponents of women’s ordination, and John Paul II employed nuptial symbolism to the exclusion of other symbolic representations of the Church in order to condemn women’s ordination, as well as birth control, abortion, homosexuality, and NRTS.

This new inflection of the argument against female priests emerged because of growing pressure in the secular and religious spheres to recognize women’s equality with men. As discussed in the preceding chapter, the post-1945 clerical shortage necessitated the laity’s taking over many functions typically reserved for priests. Given the disproportionate representation of women in congregations, this lay ministry proved overwhelmingly female. As Catholic women gained greater responsibility, competency, and confidence in the secular and religious spheres, some challenged the Church’s centuries-old gender divide advanced in the early twentieth century by eminent moral theologians such as Joseph Mausbach: “The existing association of woman with marriage and motherhood is a completely valid explanation of her humble, sum contribution to culture.”⁶

Developments in other religious communities also placed pressure on the Catholic Church to change its teachings on ordination. In 1958, the General Synod of the Swedish Lutheran Church allowed women to serve as pastors;⁷ that same year some member churches of the EKD in Germany endorsed ordaining women, so long as these women remained unmarried.⁸ Within Christianity, attitudes toward women were gradually shifting under the dual influence of changing theological and secular conceptions of womanhood. Yet these early ordinations posed no serious issues for Rome. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Anglican Communion, none of the aforementioned Protestant churches associated ministry with a claim to apostolic succession (a lineage dating back to Jesus’s twelve apostles). Then, in 1975, the Anglican Church of Canada authorized the ordination of women, capturing the Catholic imagination: Did theological or biblical justifications, in fact, exist for excluding women from the apostolic priesthood? If the Anglican Church allowed women priests, might the Catholic Church also do so?⁹

That same year, twelve hundred Catholics gathered in Detroit, Michigan, for the Women’s Ordination Conference (woc), sponsored by Priests for Equality; the following year the woc was established as a separate organization.¹⁰ In Canada and the United States, the Catholic women’s ordination

movement grew rapidly in the 1970s, and by the early 1980s it had made some headway in Western Europe, including West Germany. The number of Anglican churches endorsing women's ordination also continued to multiply, despite the pressure Paul VI and John Paul II placed on the archbishop of Canterbury, the figurehead of the Anglican Communion. In 1985 the Church of England accepted women into the diaconate, and in 1992 it joined the ranks of those permitting women priests.¹¹

The Catholic Church's resistance to the ordination of women, like its positions on celibacy, artificial contraception, abortion, and NRTS, intensified its isolation from other Christian communities. In its staunch defense of a gendered division of labor and the values associated with it, the Church's arguments in favor of a male celibate priesthood and against birth control, abortion, and reproductive technologies became increasingly entangled in the second half of the twentieth century. Against this backdrop, a theological and pastoral neoconservatism developed at the highest levels of the Church hierarchy that exacerbated tensions within the Church and polarized the Catholic lay community in West Germany and elsewhere.

Vatican II, the Priesthood, and Women in the Church

Long before John XXIII championed the dignity of women in his 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, papal attitudes toward women had been changing.¹² Pius X (1903–1914) approved of women attending universities and engaging in some professional activities; Benedict XV (1914–1922) favored extending the vote to women.¹³ Yet on the eve of Vatican II, canon law still viewed women as inferior to men. In addition to denying women the right to act as altar servers, readers, deacons, and priests,¹⁴ Canon 133 required priests to avoid “women upon whom suspicion might fall.”¹⁵ Canon 702 stated that women could not be full members of religious orders. Canon 1262 required women to wear veils in church; it also specified that they “should dress modestly, especially when they approach the table of the Lord.”¹⁶ No corresponding admonishments existed for men.

For the Swiss Catholic lawyer Gertrud Heinzelmann, Vatican II represented an opportunity for the Church to abandon Thomist teachings and introduce full equality for women. On May 23, 1962, she submitted a petition to the Preparatory Commission of the Second Vatican Council: “I want this petition to point an accusing finger as it were, for half of mankind, the feminine half which has been oppressed for thousands of years. By its wrong concept of women the Church has aided and abetted in this oppression, and

it still does, in a way that grievously offends the Christian conscience.”¹⁷ Heinzelmann attacked the Church’s continued reliance on “antiquated Thomist opinions” that represented “a slur on the value and dignity of half of mankind and a sore wound to their spiritual dignity.”¹⁸ She argued that although some contemporary theologians endeavored “to interpret women in a different light,” these efforts remained inconsequential so long as they continued to be “repudiated by clearly contrary formal pronouncements.”¹⁹ She then reasoned that if the Church must cling to Thomist doctrine, it should heed Aquinas’s assertion that women also possessed a rational soul and could be baptized in the Church. Aquinas acknowledged that “man and woman receive Baptism in the same way” and that “the effect of Baptism is the same in both.”²⁰ For Heinzelmann, this acknowledgment demonstrated that Thomist principles did not support denying women admission to the priesthood: “The opposite conclusion should have been reached from the Thomist doctrine on the faculties of the human soul and the sacramental character. For the sacramental has its seat in the faculty of knowing and this faculty is in woman in the same way as in man, inherent in the incorporeal reason.”²¹

The council fathers received petitions from three other German women, all academically trained in theology, advocating women’s ordination—one submitted jointly by Ida Raming and Iris Müller and one from Josefa Theresia Münch. Raming and Müller opened their petition by enumerating eight typical arguments against women’s ordination: (1) In the order of creation, woman was subordinate to man. (2) The essential qualities of womanhood (passivity and receptivity) disqualified her. (3) Christ appeared on earth as a man. (4) Christ chose only men as apostles. (5) The apostle Paul admonished women to remain silent in the Church. (6) The mother of Jesus was never recognized as an apostle. (7) Women’s ordination would disturb the sexual polarity of the sacramental space. (8) It would violate Church tradition.²² In their rebuttal, they focused on the argument that Christ came into the world as a man. They argued that Christ’s maleness was not the essential dimension of his incarnation: “The sexual component is irrelevant, since the male gender of Christ does not make Christ a Redeemer, only his incarnation as a human being.”²³ Since Christ’s redemptory power is not determined by his male gender, the essential semblance between priest and Christ is not maleness but rather the “grace-filled personality of a human being.”²⁴ In contrast, in her petition, Münch underscored the devastating impact of the clerical shortage on Catholic communities. In fact, her peti-

tion was prompted by news of Heinzelmänn's emphasis on gender equality, which she feared would do more damage than good: "Up to now I had been afraid that an un-polemic, theological, pastoral justification for the ordination of women would only unleash increased resistance among the competent circles in Rome; now I tried to imagine how much more vehement a resistance would be provoked if the question were approached from the aspect of women's rights as in the Council contribution of this Swiss lawyer."²⁵

Münch also gained notoriety for asking Auxiliary Bishop Walther Kampe of Limburg, Germany, at the first conciliar press conference for German-speaking journalists if women would also be invited to the council. Kampe responded, "Perhaps to the Third Vatican Council!"²⁶ According to Münch, "roaring laughter like applause to a successful joke" greeted his response, and Ferdinand Örtel explained to readers of the German Catholic journal *Feuerreiter*, "Many of the journalists are not Catholics and so ask questions that Catholics take for granted."²⁷ As Münch noted wryly in 1991, it seemed "the writer could not imagine that such a question could stem from the mouth of a Catholic theologian who knew very well, and regretted very much, that no women had been invited."²⁸ But once the issue of women's place in the Church had been broached, Church officials proved unable to silence discussions.

In 1964, Heinzelmänn published the edited volume *Wir schweigen nicht länger!* (We won't keep silent any longer!), which included the three conciliar petitions advocating women's ordination, as well as essays by the American feminist theologian Mary Daly and the American Catholic philosopher Rosemary Lauer. The book also reprinted the resolutions of the St. Joan's International Alliance from 1963 and 1964 advocating women's equal participation in all Church spheres. The book sparked a heated reaction from *L'Osservatore Romano*, which published a four-part series defending the male-only priesthood by Italian theologian Gino Concetti. Concetti's defense emphasized Church tradition and implied that the book's authors were guilty of heresy: "The Rubicon, the insurmountable wall, has its origins in Christ. Not without reason have the fathers on the authority of St. Ephanius, St. Ambrosius, St. Augustinus, and St. Irenaeus specified as heresy the doctrine whereby women are granted priestly authority."²⁹

But *L'Osservatore Romano* had overreacted to what it described as the "blossoming" tendency since Vatican II to recognize women as capable of priestly authority.³⁰ In 1964, most Catholic women did not support women's ordination; in fact, they were largely uninterested in the topic. Of the

106 West German Catholic women who responded to *Frau und Mutter's* invitation to express their hopes for Vatican II, not one referenced women's ordination. Instead, the reforms that they wanted included removing the ban on married couples' use of artificial contraception; allowing divorced and remarried persons to participate in Communion; and introducing the vernacular mass. They also voiced their preference for more ecumenical dialogue and a new understanding of confession—one that emphasized forgiveness rather than guilt. A few readers mentioned that they wanted the Church to abandon its teaching that stillborn children went to hell because they had not been baptized.³¹ The Austrian journal *Wort und Wahrheit* also surveyed readers about expectations for the upcoming council. Of the eighty-one respondents, only five were women. Ida Friederike Görres, the Church historian, argued against the council addressing the woman question. Three female respondents did not mention it and only one proposed a partial revision of Thomist teachings on women.³²

In short, the council fathers faced no serious pressure from mainstream Catholic women's groups to discuss women's ordination, and the topic was never broached at Vatican II, although Archbishop Paul J. Hallinan of Atlanta, Georgia, filed a written opinion with the council's General Secretariat recommending that women be allowed to serve as readers and acolytes and, after appropriate instruction, as ordained deacons.³³ However, the other American bishops did not support his motion, and it was never read in the aula. Thus, most council fathers were unaware of its existence.³⁴

Yet Vatican II did introduce three theological innovations that would inform subsequent debates on women's ordination. First, Article 29 of *Gaudium et Spes* disavowed all forms of discrimination in church and society, including discrimination based on gender.³⁵ Thus, woman's exclusion from Church offices could no longer be justified by the claim of female inferiority; a new rationale would have to be found. Second, although no conciliar document mentioned minor orders, the new accent on lay participation in the liturgy, introduced at Vatican II, suggested that minor orders had no place in the Church's future. The Council of Trent had recognized three major orders (priest, deacon, and subdeacon) and four minor orders (porter, acolyte, exorcist, and lector).³⁶ The 1917 Code of Canon Law restricted minor orders to candidates for the priesthood.³⁷ In 1972, Paul VI abolished minor orders, noting that the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy had made them "obsolete" because it clearly demonstrated that baptism gave laypersons the right to participate in liturgical celebrations. In lieu of minor orders, Paul VI

established two ministries—acolyte and lector; he opened these new ministries to laymen, but not laywomen.³⁸ Since the new offices did not require ordination, women's exclusion seemed theologically unjustified and exposed the Church to charges of misogyny. Third, Article 29 of *Lumen Gentium* reinstated the permanent diaconate to which married men could be admitted. As discussed in the preceding chapter, the coexistence of two diaconates (one for married and one for unmarried men) fueled the post-Vatican II celibacy debate. It also had implications for the women's ordination debate. If the diaconate no longer constituted a stepping-stone to the priesthood, why not ordain women as deacons, even if the priesthood remained restricted to them? The Bible and early Church documents contained multiple references to female deacons. Unlike the priesthood, the ordination of female deacons had a potential historical precedent.³⁹ By encouraging lay participation in the liturgy, introducing a more positive valuation of women, and opening the diaconate to married men, Vatican II had created the foundation for a reevaluation of women's roles in the Church.

Inspired by Vatican II, mainstream West German Catholic women's organizations cautiously pursued the offices of deacon, altar server, and lector as options for women wanting a more active role in ministry. Marianne Dirks, president of the kfd, noted in 1967 that the council fathers no longer limited women "to the sphere of caritas and welfare and to their maternal role as in countless earlier ecclesial official statements, but accepted and called for them in the entire scope of human and spiritual competencies."⁴⁰ Although canon law still excluded women from these offices, many Catholics believed that the Pontifical Commission for the Revision of Canon Law, charged with updating the code in light of conciliar principles, would lift some or all of these restrictions. In 1967, the kfd leader Hildegard Harmsen opined, "Since no theological reasons exist for excluding women from the priesthood, a legal action that allowed for women's ordination as deacons should be considered so as to realize the repeatedly underscored 'equality' found in conciliar decrees."⁴¹

The new Code of Canon Law, however, did not materialize until January 1983. For Catholics who wanted the Church to open more offices to women, the new code was a disappointment. The restriction against women being officially installed as lectors or acolytes remained intact, although it allowed for "the temporary deputation" of women if no qualified male was available.⁴² The diaconate also remained closed to women. Admittedly, the new code employed more gender-neutral language and did not explicitly

ban female altar servers.⁴³ But in the twenty years that had elapsed since the commission's establishment, Catholic women's expectations had changed and many viewed these revisions as merely cosmetic.

Reconceptualizing Catholic Womanhood in West Germany

Until 1968, the kfd had been known as the Central Association of Catholic Communities of Women and Mothers (*Zentralverband der katholischen Frauen- und Müttergemeinschaften*). Yet as early as the 1950s, the kfd president, Marianne Dirks, recognized that the organization's name posed problems: "They [young women] will not join our communities if they are named mothers' associations."⁴⁴ In making this statement, Dirks was not disavowing motherhood as central to women's identity. In fact, as late as 1960, she equated women's ministry in the Church with motherhood: "For every obedient service of the woman amounts to her saying yes to her innermost calling—motherhood."⁴⁵ Like those of most West German Catholic women, Marianne Dirks's views on gender evolved slowly—influenced by Vatican II, subsequent theological innovations, and changes in mainstream society.

By 1967, Dirks no longer accepted the well-worn Catholic image of the "eternal woman" as self-sacrificing wife and mother: "We know today that much of what seemingly belonged to the essential being of woman—greater capacity for sacrifice and lesser ability for abstraction—is historically determined on the basis of necessary accommodation and conventional definition, and it can and has changed in various cultures."⁴⁶ After Vatican II, Dirks championed a collaborative partnership between women and priests, asserting that the time when priests acted authoritatively in the name of a women's organization had passed.⁴⁷ However, she did not support council petitions advocating women's ordination.⁴⁸

Leaders of mainstream West German Catholic women's organizations such as Dirks rejected the petitioners' approach to improving women's position in the Church. Heinzelmann, Müller, and Raming believed that female equality in the Church required women's admission to the priesthood and rejected any compromise solution. In *Die getrennten Schwester*, published in 1966, Heinzelmann described women's ordination as "the litmus test" through which "the sincerity of council statements about the equality of humans in Christ had to be proved."⁴⁹ In the same publication, Heinzelmann expressed frustration with mainstream Catholic women's organizations, attributing their failure to support women's ordination to an absence of the

“psychical preconditions” for resisting the “traditional orientation to subordination and obedience.”⁵⁰

In contrast, kfd leaders advocated an incremental approach to reform, believing it unwise to pressure German bishops and priests, because they were ill prepared for the “upsurge of women” (*Frauenaufschwung*) sparked by Vatican II. As Dirks explained, “The fact is, as a woman, one cannot escape the impression that some priests cannot see us impartially as human beings, but only as female beings who could be dangerous to them.”⁵¹ Given this clerical mentality, Dirks contended that the tactics of Heinzelmann, Raming, and their followers were counterproductive, because they generated a clerical “allergic reaction” to the “woman question.”⁵²

Dirks had experienced this “allergic reaction” firsthand in 1967 when she wrote the chair of the DBK, Julius Cardinal Döpfner, concerning a female diaconate. His negative reaction surprised Dirks.⁵³ In 1966, Döpfner had supported the resolution of the European Congress of the Lay Apostolate, in which Dirks took part, asking the pope to approve the use of artificial contraception by married couples.⁵⁴ Yet in 1967, Döpfner’s willingness to embrace reform did not include an acceptance of a female diaconate. In two letters to Hildegard Harmsen, Dirks reconstructed her exchange with Döpfner, who reacted to the topic “as if it were a thorn in his flesh.”⁵⁵ Despite this negative reaction, Harmsen believed that the kfd should officially broach the topic with the DBK, as the conservative Catholic leaders with whom she had spoken had expressed no strong objections, though most had given the topic little thought.⁵⁶ However, neither woman considered the creation of a female diaconate the most pressing issue for women in the Church. Dirks explained, “In my view, the call for a female diaconate is somewhat forced; admittedly we must make our position fundamentally clear and we have done that.”⁵⁷

This tentative dialogue with the German hierarchy made significant advances at the Würzburg Synod, when Subcommittee VII—the same subcommittee handling the topics of clerical celibacy and *viri probati*—included the creation of a female diaconate on its agenda. Upon hearing the news, a Catholic career woman wrote the chair of the subcommittee, Bishop Tenhumberg, highlighting the topic’s significance for the future of the Church: “First I want to express my joy that this topic is being addressed; it was so disappointing when the survey did not mention it. This theme is of great importance to the Church today, because the Church’s credibility before the world depends upon it. In a world in which equality has by no

means been realized, should not the Church lead by example? . . . I know of no cogent reason to refuse women the priestly office.”⁵⁸ Tenhumberg dismissed the topic of female priests as impractical; however, in his response, he supported a female diaconate: “I believe that your concerns are well represented—that is, to secure for women their due place in the Church. However, the issue of ordaining women as priests is still so theologically unclear that on this matter any practical decision can hardly be expected. However, it seems to me that accepting women as deacons is a very real possibility.”⁵⁹ The DBK had revised its position since Döpfner’s 1967 exchange with Marianne Dirks.

The Würzburg Synod’s final report described the creation of a female diaconate as “one of the most controversial” issues discussed, since “dogmatic and historical-dogmatic issues” were at stake.⁶⁰ Three theological experts had been consulted—Professor Yves Congar of France and Professors Peter Hünermann and Herbert Vorgrimler of West Germany. All three experts had supported the creation of a female diaconate. According to the report, two issues dominated discussions at the synod. The first was whether a historical precedent existed for a female diaconate and, if so, whether female deacons in the early Church took the same vows as their male counterparts. The subcommission concluded that the New Testament in conjunction with early Church documents such as the *Didascalia* provided sufficient evidence that a female diaconate constituted a common practice in the early Church;⁶¹ moreover, until the medieval era, the ordinations of male and female candidates had the same character. The second major issue, which the report mentioned, concerned the expedience of creating a female diaconate. Would reinstating a female diaconate enrich the life of the Church? Synodal delegates agreed that the continued exclusion of women from the diaconate did not serve the Church’s best interests and called on the pope to accept women as deacons.⁶²

Interestingly, the final report did not mention two themes that permeated Subcommission VII’s discussions of the female diaconate: the “crisis in the priestly career”⁶³ and the fear that theologically trained women would settle for nothing less than the priesthood. As noted in Chapter 1, members of the subcommission reviewed multiple documents detailing the growing severity of the clerical shortage in the post-1945 era (see Appendixes C and F). In 1946, the German bishops had opened the study of theology to laymen and laywomen because there were not enough priests to provide religious instruction in the schools. By 1950, women constituted 20 percent of

Catholic theological students at the University of Münster; in the 1960s, women's presence in West German Catholic theological faculties continued to grow, so that by 1983, women constituted 40 percent of the student body at the Faculty for Catholic Theology at the University of Münster.⁶⁴

The increase in lay theologians, particularly female theologians, alarmed some clergy members serving on the subcommission, and this fear found expression in discussions about creating a female diaconate. Klaus Fritz, a priest and secondary school instructor, predicted that if the Church did not find opportunities to engage lay theologians in the ministry, "intentionally or unintentionally" these theologians would "incite anti-Church sentiments." Bishop Tenhumberg reported that in the Diocese of Münster, lay theological students (male and female) were advised to pursue a second field in addition to their religious studies. In response, Theresia Hauser, leader of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Frauenseelsorge* in Bavaria, demanded to know "why the Church feared the collaboration of academically trained women in pastoral service," and Barbara Albrecht asserted that employing women as pastoral assistants was not an acceptable alternative to ordaining women as deacons.⁶⁵

Although the women serving on Subcommission VII refused to compromise on a female diaconate, they chose not to broach the topic of ordaining women priests. Barbara Bredlow underscored this point in a letter to Bishop Klaus Hemmerle: "In my opinion, with the exception of the priestly ministry, there is no pastoral duty that the woman could not perform. . . . As far as the priesthood, I have deliberately omitted this topic, because I believe the time is not ripe."⁶⁶ Like the kfd leadership, female participants at the synod were sensitive to the possibility of a clerical backlash. They acknowledged that the diaconate was no substitute for the priesthood and that "Church governance theologically could not be separated from priestly ordination"—a point insisted on by their male colleagues.⁶⁷

But the cautious approach of mainstream Catholic female leaders did not change the fact that a growing number of West German Catholic women questioned women's exclusion from the priesthood. In 1973, the KDFB, the second-largest Catholic women's association, surveyed its members on women's roles in church and society and published a synopsis of "representative responses" in its magazine, *Die christliche Frau*.⁶⁸ On the question of women's ordination, the editors claimed that young and middle-age members criticized the taboo nature of the topic and challenged the theological justification for excluding women from the priesthood. For example, they

quoted one young woman as follows: "The rationale, namely that Christ called no women as apostles, is not substantive. He did not come to change historical conditions."⁶⁹

However, the results of this survey should not be exaggerated; the editors provided no statistical data, so the actual percentage of young KDFB members who were dissatisfied with the Church's position on ordination remains unknown. Moreover, that same year, kfd members indicated their support for the papal ban on women's ordination in countless letters to *Frau und Mutter*, the kfd journal. One woman wrote, "It is serendipitous that Pope Paul VI clearly delineated in his decree that women should be excluded in perpetuity from the liturgical ministry." Another woman wrote, "Catholic women should stand behind the Holy Father; there are already enough opportunities for women to work in the Church." A third woman dismissed the idea of expanding women's ministries, asserting, "Today there is too much talk and not enough prayer."⁷⁰ The different perspectives of kfd and KDFB women can be explained in part by the divergent histories of the two organizations. Unlike the kfd, the KDFB promoted the participation of married and unmarried women from its inception; founded in 1903, it supported the liberal and socialist concepts of the secular women's movement of that era, and its early programs mirrored that commitment. Traditionally, the KDFB drew its members from the ranks of the educated bourgeoisie, while kfd members came from the petty bourgeoisie.⁷¹

But slowly Catholic women from all social strata were beginning to reconceptualize womanhood and their relationship with the Church. Change was incremental, however, and West German Catholic women's organizations lagged far behind their North American counterparts. Although German-speaking women had voiced their dissatisfaction with women's exclusion from the priesthood as early as the 1920s, the epicenter of the women's ordination movement had shifted from Europe to North America by the 1970s.⁷²

International Developments and German Reactions

The Würzburg Synod coincided with the 1971 World Bishops' Synod in Rome. The themes of this international synod were justice in the world and the priesthood. During discussions on justice in the world, Archbishop Flahiff of Winnipeg, speaking on behalf of the Canadian bishops, recommended establishing a commission to study women's role in the ministry: "Despite a centuries-old social tradition against the ministry of women in

the Church, we are convinced that the signs of the times (and one of these is that women already perform many pastoral services with great success) strongly urge at least a study both of the present situation and of the possibilities for the future.”⁷³ The Third World Congress of the Lay Apostolate in 1968 and the Dutch National Pastoral Council in 1969 had made similar appeals.⁷⁴ With pressure mounting on Rome to address women’s position in the Church, Paul VI announced on May 3, 1972, the creation of the Papal Study Commission on Women in the Church and Society. The study commission had twenty-five members, thirteen of whom were women.⁷⁵ That same year, Paul VI granted an audience to Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* and former president of the National Organization for Women.⁷⁶

Friedan had requested an audience with the pope, believing despite some “implacable die-hard statements issuing from the Pope” that the creation of the papal commission and Flahiff’s remarks signaled a more positive valuation of women at the highest levels of the Church hierarchy. To her surprise, Paul VI agreed to meet with her.⁷⁷ At their meeting, Friedan presented the pope with a gift, a pendant, and told him: “This is the symbol of the women’s movement—the sign of the female, in biology, crossed by the sign of absolute equality. As Your Holiness can see, when women are completely equal to men, it becomes a different kind of cross.”⁷⁸ She told the pope that she hoped that the Catholic Church would become “a force for the liberation of women.”⁷⁹ Through his interpreter, Paul VI responded, “We want you to know that it will not be a radical approach because the Church has always upheld the dignity of women.”⁸⁰

Paul VI and Betty Friedan, as representatives of the Catholic hierarchy and the American women’s movement, respectively, had fundamentally different understandings of gender equality. The pope believed that the Church’s esteem for the Virgin Mary constituted an avowal of women’s dignity. Since Mary embodied the feminine essence, any discussion of equality had to stem from the emulation of Mary. On November 6, 1974, in response to the United Nations’ designation of 1975 as “International Women’s Year,” Paul VI underscored how Mary defined the feminine sphere and equality:

Equality can only be found in its essential foundation, which is the dignity of the human person, man and woman, in their filial relationship with God, of whom they are the visible image. But this does not exclude the distinction, in unity, and the specific contribution of woman to the full development of

society, according to her proper and personal vocation. . . . As we stated in our recent Exhortation *Marialis Cultus*, our age is called upon to verify and to “compare its anthropological ideas and the problems springing therefrom with the figure of the Virgin Mary as presented by the Gospel.”⁸¹

For Paul VI, equality did not mean that men and women shared the same vocation. Women priests had no place in “the economy of the mystery of Christ and the Church,” because the emulation of Mary defined women’s role as virgin and mother.⁸² Thus, shortly after establishing the study commission, Paul VI informed commission members that they were not to broach the topic of women priests, birth control, or abortion.⁸³

Removing women’s ordination from the study commission’s agenda did not dampen Catholic interest in the topic, which was fueled in part by developments in the Anglican Communion. In 1974, many Catholic feminists attended the irregular ordination of eleven Episcopalian women in Philadelphia.⁸⁴ These ordinations inspired Catholic feminists and threatened to derail the ecumenical talks of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, established in 1969.⁸⁵ On July 9, 1975, Donald Coggan, archbishop of Canterbury, informed Paul VI of “the slow but steady growth of a consensus of opinion within the Anglican Communion, that there are no fundamental objections in principle to the ordination of women to the priesthood.”⁸⁶ Paul VI replied by reiterating the Catholic position and warning that ordaining women jeopardized continued ecumenical dialogue between the two churches: “We must regretfully recognize that the new course taken by the Anglican Communion in admitting women to the ordained priesthood cannot fail to introduce into this dialogue an element of grave difficulty which those involved will have to take seriously into account.”⁸⁷ But the number of Anglican churches ordaining women continued to grow, and the newly ordained women became regular speakers at Catholic feminist gatherings in the United States and Canada.⁸⁸

In 1975, inspired by their Anglican sisters and by Bishop Flahiff’s entreaty at the 1971 World Bishops’ Synod, American Catholic feminists with the support of Priests for Equality held the first Catholic Women’s Ordination Conference in Detroit, Michigan. The conference was a huge success, attracting more participants than could be accommodated; an estimated five hundred people had to be turned away. Of the twelve hundred participants, two-thirds belonged to religious communities.⁸⁹ Unlike nuns in West Germany, American nuns played a leading role in the Catholic feminist move-

ment. Ida Raming, the founder of the first German group dedicated solely to women's ordination, attributed German nuns' noninvolvement in the ordination movement to two factors—differences in the education and indoctrination of North American and German nuns and the greater dependence of German female orders than their American and Canadian counterparts on male supervision. Whatever the explanation, Norbert Sommer, editor of the book *Nennt uns nicht Brüder! Frauen in der Kirche durchbrechen das Schweigen*, noted in 1983 that he could find only one German nun willing to contribute to his book, and *Der Spiegel* observed in 1984 that nuns dissatisfied with religious life in West Germany opted to resign rather than protest.⁹⁰

But so-called new nuns in North America joined female lay theologians at the conference in calling for a renewed priestly ministry free of the corruption brought about by “two thousand years of patriarchal traditions.”⁹¹ Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, a West German lay theologian who moved to the United States after failing to secure an academic position in her homeland, spoke about the leadership roles exercised by women in the early Church as missionaries, prophets, evangelists, and apostles and claimed that the Church had systematically suppressed their history in order to exclude women from office.⁹² Rosemary Radford Ruether emphasized the oppressive character of patriarchal symbolism: “Patriarchy not only pervades specific dictates about women, but also creates an entire symbolic edifice of reality that reflects the social hierarchy of male dominance and female submission.”⁹³ Yet according to one witness, it was Sister Margaret Farley's plea that women pursue ordination “without bitterness,” never abandoning the Church despite its failure to recognize woman's full humanity, that brought many participants to tears.⁹⁴ In 1976, the WOC was established as an independent entity (no longer under the auspices of Priests for Equality); it was the first Catholic organization dedicated solely to women's admission to the priesthood.⁹⁵

The Vatican viewed the conference and developments in the Anglican Church with grave concern. However, the Church's worries did not end there. In 1976, news leaked that the Pontifical Bible Commission had concluded that biblical evidence did not suffice to settle “in a clear way and once and for all” the question of ordaining women.⁹⁶ The leak of the commission's findings exacerbated ecumenical and feminist pressures on Vatican authorities to provide theological justification for excluding women from the priesthood. Against this backdrop, Paul VI instructed the CDF to ex-

plain the Church's teachings on the male-only priesthood. On October 15, 1976, the CDF released *Inter Insigniores*, but the declaration proved anything but *Roma locuta, causa finita*. Instead, as Leonard Swidler noted in the introduction of the edited volume *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration*, in which forty-four North American Catholic scholars offered scathing critiques of the declaration, *Inter Insigniores* had the opposite effect, stimulating discussion and attracting more individuals to the cause.⁹⁷ The German theologian Karl-Heinz Weger echoed this opinion in an article for the Swiss Catholic journal *Orientierung*.⁹⁸

Inter Insigniores opened with an acknowledgment that the ordination of women within other Christian faiths posed ecumenical and internal problems for the Church, sparking demands for the Catholic Church to "modify her discipline."⁹⁹ These initiatives required the Church to "make her thinking known"—that "the Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination."¹⁰⁰ The primary rationale was that women were incapable of acting in the person and role of Christ, because they did not resemble Jesus in his maleness. The CDF supported this assertion by citing the constant tradition of the Church, Jesus's actions, the practices of the apostles, and the symbolic nuptial relationship between the Church and Christ.

Inter Insigniores asserted that with the exception of a "few heretical sects in the first centuries," the Church had never permitted women priests.¹⁰¹ The document conceded that early Church fathers had been influenced by contemporary social prejudices against women; however, these prejudices "hardly had any influence on their pastoral activity, and still less on their spiritual direction."¹⁰² Thus, the exclusion of women from the priesthood had been "willed by the Lord Jesus Christ and carefully maintained by the apostles."¹⁰³

The CDF then turned its attention to the actions of Christ, specifically to the fact that Jesus chose no women as "part of the Twelve."¹⁰⁴ This choice, the CDF asserted, could not be dismissed as a concession to the customs of the time, since on other occasions Jesus had "deliberately and courageously" broken with those customs.¹⁰⁵ Although the document admitted that a "purely historical exegesis" could not by itself justify the all-male priesthood, it contended that there were "a number of convergent indications that make all the more remarkable the fact that Jesus did not entrust the apostolic charge to women."¹⁰⁶

As convergent indications, the CDF cited the apostles' actions and nup-

tial symbolism in the New Testament. According to the CDF, the apostles, following Jesus's example, allowed women an active role in spreading the word of God. However, despite the important role "played by women on the day of Resurrection, their collaboration was not extended by Saint Paul to the official and public proclamation of the message, since this proclamation belongs exclusively to the apostolic mission."¹⁰⁷ The CDF concluded that although the Church possessed some power over the sacraments, in that it could modify a sacramental sign to accommodate "circumstances, times and places," it had no authority to alter the basic "substance" of a sacrament established by Jesus.¹⁰⁸

The CDF next extended the nuptial metaphor to the ministry, arguing that the nuptial relationship defined human identity, salvation, and the life of the Church: "For the salvation offered by God to men and women, the union with him to which they are called—in short, the Covenant—took on, from the Old Testament Prophets onwards, the privileged form of a nuptial mystery. . . . It is through this Scriptural language, all interwoven with symbols, and which expresses and affects man and woman in their profound identity, that there is revealed the mystery of God and Christ, a mystery which of itself is unfathomable. . . . That is why we can never ignore the fact that Christ is a man."¹⁰⁹ In other words, the priest needed to be a biological copy of Christ, because "the Incarnation of the Word took place according to the male sex . . . and this fact . . . cannot be disassociated from the economy of salvation."¹¹⁰ Although the CDF underscored that women's exclusion from the priesthood did not imply inferiority, it asserted that sexual differences exercised "an important influence, much deeper than, for example, ethnic differences; the latter of which do not affect the human person as intimately as the difference of sex, which is directly ordained both for the communion of the persons and for the generation of human beings."¹¹¹ The nuptial metaphor as used by the CDF established a gendered and hierarchical relationship between the different levels of the Church—Christ and Church at the top level of the bridegroom/bride hierarchy, followed by priest and laity, and finally man and woman.

Supporters and opponents of *Inter Insigniores* immediately mobilized their resources, and a flood of articles—pro and con—inundated the Catholic world. In January 1977, *L'Osservatore Romano* launched a five-part series by prominent theologians defending and expanding on the declaration's arguments, particularly its use of nuptial symbolism. In the opening article, the Italian theologian Raimondo Spiazzi praised the declaration for clari-

ifying the relationship between the male priest and the community by elucidating the “nuptial mystery”: “The declaration clarifies and completes this traditional doctrine, explaining that it is a question of a reflection of Christ as ‘author of the covenant, bridegroom and head of the Church,’ the eternal Word who, to carry out God’s plan historically, became incarnate in our human nature according to the male sex, certainly not to affirm a natural superiority of man over woman, but raising to the summit of creation—where the mystery of incarnation is placed—the duality, complementarity, and correlativity of the sexes.”¹¹² By recognizing the divinely sanctioned distinction between the sexes, a woman could advance herself “as a woman, and not according to other considerations.”¹¹³

However, Hans Urs von Balthasar’s article ultimately garnered the most attention because of his subsequent influence on John Paul II’s theology of the body, in which nuptial symbolism played a prominent role.¹¹⁴ Balthasar argued that the Church “must accept herself, as she was born.” In his estimation, sexual difference reproduced the divine relationship between the Church and Christ: “The redemptive mystery ‘Christ-Church’ is the superabundant fulfillment of the mystery of creation between man and woman, as Paul affirms very forcefully, so that the fundamental mystery of creation is called ‘great’ precisely in view of its fulfillment in the mystery of redemption. . . . The natural sexual difference is charged, as difference, with a supernatural emphasis. . . . It is only from the indestructible difference between Christ and Church (prepared, but not yet incarnate in the difference between Yahweh and Israel) that there is reflected the decisive light about the real reciprocity between man and woman.”¹¹⁵ For Balthasar, reciprocity meant that woman represented the counterimage of man. Man, “as a sexual being, only represents what he is not and transmits what he does not actually possess, and so is, as described, at the same time more and less than himself; woman rests on herself,” having nothing to represent that is not herself.¹¹⁶ Although Balthasar exalted women because “in the virgin-mother Mary—is the privileged place where God can and wishes to be received in the world,” he denied her ability to represent Christ, because she was incapable of transcending her gender.¹¹⁷

For opponents of *Inter Insigniores*, Plato’s admonishment that a “man should above all be on guard against resemblances” seemed apropos.¹¹⁸ In the German-speaking world, the Swiss Jesuit Albert Ebnetter underscored the contradictions and dangers embedded in the gendered “acrobatics” of *Inter Insigniores*: “When for example it is stated in the text that Christ was and

remains a man, for many it makes no sense because then Christ ‘represents’ only a man in the Annunciation and in the sacraments. If it is then claimed that the priest also represents the Church, but the Church is depicted in the text and by the Church Fathers as ‘bride’ and ‘mother,’ then it requires a bit of conceptual acrobatics in order to show that nevertheless it is the man and not the women who represents the corresponding symbolic figure.”¹¹⁹ If women could not represent Christ, then Christ could not represent women; the salvation of half of humanity could no longer be assumed. Moreover, in arguing that the priest also represented the Church—that is, the “bride” and “mother” of Christ—the CDF effectively denied women any gender-specific role, since the male priest could embody both the female Church and the male Savior.¹²⁰

In *Theologische Quartalschrift*, Hans Küng and Gerhard Lohfink employed a *reductio ad absurdum* argument: “Are we to think that only married and gainfully employed Jews (whenever possible fishermen from Lake Gennesaret) will now be considered for the office of priest or bishop in the Catholic Church?”¹²¹ Karl Rahner also challenged claims that the male-only priesthood was divinely willed, stating the declaration had not proved “that the actual attitude of Jesus and the apostles in the strict sense of the word implies a norm of divine revelation.”¹²² Rahner also noted that “the declaration, despite papal approval, is not a definitive statement; it is fundamentally reformable; it can (which does not *a priori* mean ‘must’) be erroneous.”¹²³

In fact, the CDF declaration did not categorically ban women’s ordination. As the biblical scholar Carroll Stuhlmueller pointed out, the declaration’s language exhibited “a low profile of authority.”¹²⁴ For example, it admitted that “classical theology scarcely touched upon” the topic and thus “the current argumentation runs the risk of neglecting essential elements.”¹²⁵ The declaration’s hesitancy reflected the newness of the challenge: “The Church’s tradition in the matter has thus been so firm in the course of the centuries that the Magisterium has not felt the need to intervene in order to formulate a principle which was not attacked, or to defend a law which was not challenged.”¹²⁶ For the moment, continued discussion and loyal dissent remained open to Catholics.

Growing Unrest: Mainstream and Alternative Catholic Women’s Organizations

In 1963, Gertrud Heinzelmann predicted that when modern Catholic women finally grasped the Church’s official teachings on womanhood, this

knowledge would have “a disenchanting effect” on their attitude toward the Church.¹²⁷ By 1979, Heinzelmann’s 1963 prediction appeared to have become a reality.

Mainstream Catholic Organizations: Expanding Women’s Sphere

In May 1979, the kfd approved a new “Orientation and Work Program,” which provided guidelines for the organization’s future mission based on the “identified situation.” This situation included the growing disillusionment of many women and youth with the Catholic faith: “Approximately sixty percent of Catholic women attend mass irregularly or not even at all. Faith and the Church for some women [are] of so little importance to their life that they look upon [them] with indifference.”¹²⁸ Bishop Wilhelm Kempf of Limburg lamented in his 1981 Lenten letter that the Church had already lost workers and soon would lose women if it did not find new ways to include them in Church ministry.¹²⁹ The West German bishops had supported the creation of a female diaconate in 1975, but the pope had refused to heed this recommendation.

In 1980, the German bishops faced a crisis when the CDWDS declared that “women are not permitted to act as altar servers.”¹³⁰ For years, girls had acted as altar servers in West Germany. The congregation’s 1980 announcement shocked and angered many West German Catholics, particularly because Vatican officials gave no reason for the exclusion. Thus, many saw it as an arbitrary assertion of patriarchal authority. This time, letters to the editor indicated that kfd members overwhelmingly disapproved of the Vatican’s actions. One woman wrote to *Frau und Mutter*, “Once again, the affected are women, and this time even girls. Women and girls have reacted with consternation, bewilderment, and yes, even desperation.”¹³¹ A second woman demanded resistance: “Should women give up? We say no! We finally live in the twentieth century, and we want to be accepted as full-fledged human beings.”¹³² Another woman recommended a boycott: “How much time, work, and money have we women given to the Church? Why don’t we withdraw for a year from all ministries and also from Church services? Then, the bishops would have to become very respectful and concrete!”¹³³ Passive acceptance was slowly giving away to active resistance among German Catholic women.

The kfd leadership launched a petition drive against the ban on altar girls. At the 1980 Catholic Congress, they collected more than twenty-four hundred signatures, including those of prominent Catholic politicians and

leaders, such as Irmgard Karwartzki (CDU) and Rita Weschbüsch (CDU), and the president of ZdK, Dr. Hans Maier. International visitors to the congress also signed the petition. The kfd wrote the chair of DBK, Joseph Cardinal Höffner:

We ask you urgently and sincerely not to stop the positive, lively development of women's collaboration in the liturgy, including girls as altar servers. We cannot understand why the Church would characterize the participation of faithful, qualified, and engaged women in the liturgical space as dangerous for the Church. In fact, we see a real danger in the coming generations if the Church does not give clear signs of abandoning its rejection of women's participation in the Liturgy and from other duties in the Church. As such a sign, we ask you, venerable Cardinal, to take this matter up with the standing council and the complete assembly of the German Bishops' Conference.¹³⁴

Yet in demanding action, kfd leaders made no reference to feminist theology.

Feminist theology was conspicuously absent from the pages of *Frau und Mutter* in the early 1980s. For one reader, this absence was unconscionable: "Why are the works of female Catholic theologians missing from Church publications? Women's dissatisfaction with the Church is mushrooming into a much-lamented silent exodus. Why do we withhold the truth about what feminist theologians are saying?"¹³⁵ Members of the kfd who wanted to know what Catholic feminist theologians were saying about the Church had to turn to sources other than the kfd member magazine—for example, liberal Catholic theological journals like *Stimmen der Zeit*, *Concilium*, and *Orientierung*, ecumenical feminist journals like *Schlangenbrut* (established in 1983), or even secular publications like *Stern*, *Der Spiegel*, and *Emma*. In these publications, they could find scathing critiques of the Church's oppression of women. For example, during the altar girl controversy, the West German feminist theologian Hildegard Lünig wrote in *Orientierung*: "Silent, listening, obeying—so three generations of Catholic women closest to me exercised a subordinate role in church, family and society. . . . What is willed by God has been determined by men. Only they do theology; they determine our life in the Church: men at the altar; women in the pews; men in the episcopate; women governed; men in teaching posts; women instructed; men in the leadership of diaconal work and caritas; women in the care of the sick and disabled. This gender division of roles we women in the Church have endured."¹³⁶ Such critiques rarely appeared in mainstream Catholic women's journals. Most Catholic women's organizations still dis-

trusted feminism, painstakingly distinguishing their reform efforts from those of religious feminists. In a 1987 letter to the kfd president, the Kreis katholischer Frauen in Heliandbund underscored the need to differentiate between the kfd's "legitimate concerns" and the "ideological aims" of religious feminists.¹³⁷ Leaders of the kfd also worried that rapprochement with feminist circles might alienate their more conservative members. Despite widespread support for the altar girl petition, many kfd members resented the organization's new orientation: "I find the emancipatory carrying-on about the position of women in the Church just for the aggrandizement of women to be embarrassing. . . . I belong to the kfd and I herewith declare my separation."¹³⁸

In the years after Vatican II, the West German Church had experienced a proliferation of small but vocal conservative Catholic groups: *Una Voce Deutschland* (1964), *Traditionalisten-Bewegung* (1965), *Bewegung für Papst und Kirche* (1969), *Priesterbruderschaft St. Pius X* (1970), *Katholische Pfadfinderschaft Europas* (1976), *Marienkinder* (1983), *Medjugorje Deutschland* (1988), and *Jugend 2000 Deutschland* (1998), to name only a few. These groups rejected most Vatican II reforms, stressed the adulation of Mary, and supported the Church's teachings on marriage and the priesthood.¹³⁹

Still, most German Catholics, including women, did not endorse the views of these ultraconservative organizations; they supported the modernization of the Church, including a more active role for women in the ministry. Yet even liberal Catholics, such as the kfd member and CDU politician Hanna-Renate Laurien, believed that the battle for women's equality in the Church should not concentrate on the priesthood, because "the introduction of a priesthood of women would lead to a schism among Catholics."¹⁴⁰ Incremental change in the Church's position on women remained the strategy of mainstream, reform-minded Catholics.

The West German bishops were willing to entertain some changes; they realized that the Church could ill-afford to alienate its core constituency, women. With reference to the ban on female altar servers, Auxiliary Bishop Walther Kampe of Limburg wrote Cardinal Höffner, "In a time when the Church must wrestle so hard for the souls of women and make such concerted efforts to preserve women's loyalty to the Church, we should avoid anything that without good cause imposes a great burden on our ministry to women."¹⁴¹ He proposed that the DBK petition the Vatican for a special provision to allow female altar servers: "Since the instruction unequivocally

forbids altar girls, we should not attempt any sleight-of-hand interpretation."¹⁴² Kampe noted that the use of female altar servers had become so commonplace that the ban was unenforceable in West Germany. Moreover, he believed that "the pastoral damage" caused by any attempt to enforce the ban "would be disproportionate to the weight of the matter," given that the position of altar server was no longer a stepping-stone to priesthood.¹⁴³ Fourteen years passed before the CDWDS granted conditional approval of female altar servers, but by then the mass exodus of young women from the Church had accelerated.¹⁴⁴

In the early 1980s, however, the kfd had cause for optimism. On September 25, 1981, the DBK released *Zu Fragen der Stellung der Frau in Kirche und Gesellschaft* (On the question of the position of woman in Church and society)—a declaration that garnered widespread praise, including that of the SPD. Dr. Brunhilde Peters, a member of the executive board of the Study Group of Social Democratic Women (Arbeitsgemeinschaft sozialdemokratischer Frauen), noted that the German bishops demonstrated "a surprising level of understanding" about the daily challenges women faced.¹⁴⁵ In particular, Peters praised the bishops' call to end discrimination against women in the workplace and to provide more social assistance to single mothers. She contrasted the bishops' progressive position with that of the ZdK, which had denounced paid maternity leave as an "unfair disadvantage for housewives."¹⁴⁶ The kfd also praised the declaration, because it "did not block the path to a female diaconate and gave unprecedented recognition to women's freedom to shape their own lives."¹⁴⁷ They hoped that the declaration would result in the installation of more women as consultants on episcopal commissions.¹⁴⁸

Three years later, hope had turned to disappointment. On December 19, 1984, the BDKJ reported in its member magazine that the 1975 request for the creation of a female diaconate by the Würzburg Synod remained unanswered by Rome.¹⁴⁹ That same year, the kfd called for another general synod, citing the failure to implement the Würzburg Synod decisions and the lack of any real progress toward including more women in decision-making bodies since the DBK had released *Zu Fragen der Stellung der Frau in Kirche und Gesellschaft*. In fact, the kfd complained that the Church had imposed more restrictions on women's service and noted that their representative with the DBK remained a male priest.¹⁵⁰ One frustrated woman wrote, "What Catholic men's association allows a woman to represent it?"¹⁵¹ By 1987, the BDKJ regularly reprinted open letters and petitions addressed to

the pope that voiced the hopes, fears, and disappointments of young people: "In the Church, old men determine young people's appropriate way of life. The Church dies because it offers no space for the young, for women, and for those who think differently. . . . We want a church in which the power structures and hierarchy are transparent, in which women have the opportunity for leadership offices, in which women are not third-class citizens (priests—men—women)." ¹⁵² The patience of reform-minded, mainstream Catholic women and youth was wearing thin. Whereas 60 percent of young women attended mass regularly in 1953, that number had dropped to 7 percent by 1985. ¹⁵³ Yet feminism and women's ordination still faced an uphill battle in the West German Catholic Church.

German Catholic Feminism: Internal Strife and Limited Appeal

The first Catholic feminist theological study group in West Germany, *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Feminismus und Kirche*, was formed in 1981. Its stated aims included the study of feminist theology and the advancement of gender equality in the Catholic Church. But the topic of women's ordination proved unpopular with most German feminist theologians. Ida Raming, who had fought for women's ordination since the early 1960s and written her habilitation on the subject, wanted the new group to endorse the admission of women to the priesthood as one of its primary aims. ¹⁵⁴ She argued that admission to the priesthood guaranteed women a voice in the decision-making bodies of the Church and thus the power to end women's legal discrimination under canon law. In contrast, Angelika Strotmann, Magdalene Bußmann, Cheryl Benard, and Edith Schlaffer reasoned that until fundamental changes were made in the structure of the Church, the danger existed that women would become complicit in patriarchal rule. ¹⁵⁵ Raming denounced this form of "inner migration" in *Frauenbewegung und Kirche*, citing J. M. Potter, an American Catholic activist: "One does not change a system by remaining pure, clean and idealistic, safely criticizing from a distance, but by stepping in and rolling up one's sleeves and working and sharing and being." ¹⁵⁶ Raming accused her opponents of using "unfair methods" to keep women's ordination off the group's program—a charge that Angelika Strotmann denied. ¹⁵⁷

Raming and her supporters split with the group; yet as Raming acknowledged, few West German Catholic feminists supported her position: "Since most female theologians in this work group rejected solidarity in the struggle for women's ordination . . . ultimately there was no basis for [my] further

collaboration.”¹⁵⁸ In 1986, Raming and Iris Müller cofounded Maria von Magdala: Initiative Gleichberechtigung für Frauen in der Kirche, the first West German Catholic group dedicated to women’s admission to the priesthood. On April 3, 1987, the two cofounders and six other Catholic women (Regina Bittner, Gertrud Tacke, Annegret Laakmann, Bärbel Sinnsbeck, Irmgard Jansen, and Hild Schmitt-Maercker) held the group’s first meeting.¹⁵⁹ This meeting of eight women received substantial media coverage, including articles in the secular Hamburg newspaper *Die Zeit* and the liberal Catholic journal *Publik-Forum* and coverage on several television news broadcasts.¹⁶⁰ *Die Zeit* published an interview with the group’s spokesperson, Gertrud Tacke, under the provocative title “Papst und Pöpstin” (Pope and Pope Joan)—an allusion to the legend of a female pope who reigned briefly during the medieval era.¹⁶¹

Media coverage provided the small group with badly needed publicity, and its membership soon grew. Regional chapters were created, and in 1988 the group established ties with the United States–based woc. Still, the group found it difficult to garner support for women’s ordination among West German Catholic women. Instead, many Catholic women continued to seek out spaces within the Church where they could meet and exchange ideas free from patriarchal interference. Alternatively, they became active in ecumenical feminist groups. Since ordination was not an issue for Protestant women, these groups devoted little time to the issue. Instead, they focused on topics of shared concern, such as the dominant representation of God as male and sexist liturgical language.¹⁶²

Ecumenical feminism, in turn, generated calls for a “women-church.” The women-church movement began in the United States in 1983 as a feminist-oriented movement within Roman Catholicism that emphasized community over hierarchy.¹⁶³ Mary Hunt, one of the American founders, provided the following definition: “My definition of women-church is a global, ecumenical movement made up of local feminist communities. . . . They seek to change social structures and personal attitudes, to stop oppression.”¹⁶⁴ In West Germany, the movement first appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹⁶⁵ Still, other German women, like their North American counterparts, opted for the Goddess movement, believing that the Christian churches were incapable of reform.¹⁶⁶ In short, a growing number of German Catholic women were seeking spiritual fulfillment outside the Church. As the DBK noted in its report for the 1987 World Synod of Bishops, “It is an obvious symptom of crisis when the percentage of West German women

participating in Church life has decreased by half, as indicated by a survey conducted last year.”¹⁶⁷

A Church Divided

In October 1987, a total of 232 members of the Catholic hierarchy met for the World Synod of Bishops on the topic “Vocation and Mission of the Laity.”¹⁶⁸ Only 64 laypersons attended; of those, 60 were nonvoting auditors. In his opening homily, the pope reminded the bishops that in addressing the mission of the laity, they were examining the Church’s fundamental identity, particularly its post–Vatican II modern identity.¹⁶⁹

Probing the Church’s modern identity included tackling the woman question. The bishops introduced more than thirty proposals addressing women’s role in the Church. Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland of the United States called on bishops to accept women as lectors, altar servers, and acolytes. He described this as the first step toward achieving full equality of the sexes in the Catholic Church. Weakland also proposed that decision-making and administrative positions at all levels be opened to women, including positions in the diaconate and high offices in the Curia and diplomatic corps.¹⁷⁰ Bishop Gerhard Schwenzer of Norway recommended that religious women be given “equal responsibility and decision-making” authority in the Curial Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.¹⁷¹ Yet the final report, *Christifideles Laici*, written by John Paul II at the request of the bishops, made no reference to these proposals.

Ostensibly, *Christifideles Laici* supported a more active role for women in the Church ministry. However, it offered no specific proposals for expanding women’s role in the Church and reiterated the ban on women priests. Instead, it called attention to women’s “often lowly and hidden work” that contributed to humanizing social relations.¹⁷² For reform-minded Catholics, such as Irmgard Jalowy, president of kfd, the synod was “very disappointing.”¹⁷³

That same year, John Paul II released the apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* in response to the synod’s call for “further study of the anthropological and theological bases” of the “dignity of being women and of being man.”¹⁷⁴ Using Mariology and nuptial symbolism, *Mulieris Dignitatem* framed the feminine mystique, the indissolubility of marriage, the celibate male priesthood, and indirectly the Church’s condemnation of homosexuality, artificial contraception, abortion, and NRTS as one cohesive argument. As noted by

critics, supporters, and skeptics, *Mulieris Dignitatem* constituted the key document for understanding John Paul II's call for a new pro-life feminine theology—one that privileged the “feminine genius” as well as a gendered and hierarchical division of labor.¹⁷⁵

Mulieris Dignitatem opened by asserting Mary's centrality to the Catholic faith: “A woman is to be found at the centre of this salvific event. The self-revelation of God, who is the inscrutable unity of the Trinity, is outlined in the Annunciation at Nazareth.”¹⁷⁶ For John Paul II, Mary represented the “humanity which belongs to all human beings, both men and women,” while at the same time modeling the archetypal ideal of women.¹⁷⁷ Mary, as the new Eve, was tainted neither by original sin nor by sexual intercourse and consequently embodied the feminine virtues to which women should aspire: “Mary means, in a sense, a going beyond the limit spoken of in the Book of Genesis (3:16) and a return to that ‘beginning’ in which one finds the ‘woman’ as she was intended to be in creation, and therefore in the eternal mind of God: in the bosom of the Most Holy Trinity. Mary is ‘the new beginning’ of the dignity and vocation of women, of each and every woman.”¹⁷⁸ By emulating Mary, John Paul II asserted, women avoided the danger of “masculinization.” In his estimation, any pursuit of equality that elided sexual difference threatened woman's “fulfillment” and “deform[ed]” her.¹⁷⁹ He defined the two essential dimensions of womanhood as virginity and motherhood, which achieved “their loftiest expression” in the mother of Jesus.¹⁸⁰

Having established Mary's centrality to the Catholic faith and the importance of women emulating her, John Paul II turned to the interrelated themes of sexual complementarity and the spousal relationship: “*The woman is another ‘I’ in a common humanity. From the very beginning they appear as a ‘unity of the two,’ and this signifies that the original solitude is overcome, the solitude in which man does not find ‘a helper fit for him’ (Gen 2:20).*”¹⁸¹ Woman is defined in relationship to man and man in relationship to woman; their subjugation is mutual, since the husband is now called upon also to obey his wife. Additionally, marriage is described as “an indispensable condition for the transmission of life.” Thus, marriage and conjugal love are “by their nature ordered: ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it’ (Gen 1:28).” Although John Paul II did not explicitly reference artificial contraception, abortion, or reproductive technologies in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, this statement implied condemnation of all three. In fact, John Paul II cited *Mulieris Dignitatem* in his subsequent explicit con-

demnation of artificial contraception, abortion, and NRTs in *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), noting that their practice inflicted a mortal wound on the family and the dignity of woman.¹⁸² Moreover, conservative theologians and “new feminists”¹⁸³ subsequently argued that implementing *Mulieris Dignitatem* required the unconditional renunciation of artificial contraception and reproductive technologies, since they compromised the sexual union of the spouses.¹⁸⁴

John Paul II also utilized the emphasis on “the unity of the two” to affirm heteronormativity and a gendered division of labor. The complementarity of man and woman precluded homosexual relations, because communion with God was tied to the male–female spousal relationship: “Moreover, we read that man cannot exist ‘alone’ (cf. Gen 2:18); he can exist only as a ‘unity of the two,’ and therefore in relation to another human person. It is a question here of a mutual relationship: man to woman and woman to man. Being a person in the image and likeness of God thus also involves existing in a relationship, in relation to the other ‘I.’ This is a prelude to the definitive self-revelation of the Triune God: a living unity in the communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”¹⁸⁵ Conjugal love between a man and a woman represented a physical reenactment of the unity of the two sexes as well as that of the divine Trinity.

But “unity of the two” did not mean abandoning the doctrine of sexual complementarity. Although John Paul II affirmed that “man and woman are human beings to an equal degree,” the declaration contained multiple statements distinguishing between masculine and feminine biological and psychological traits.¹⁸⁶ For example, he argued that physical and spiritual motherhood complemented one another and defined woman’s vocation: “And does not physical motherhood also have to be spiritual motherhood, in order to respond to the whole truth about the human being, who is a unity of body and spirit? Thus there exist many reasons in these two different paths—the two different vocations of women—a profound complementarity, and even a profound union with a person’s being.”¹⁸⁷

Spiritual motherhood also accounted for the celibacy of priests and female members of religious orders: “In the teachings of Christ, motherhood is also connected with virginity, but also distinct from it.” John Paul II noted that in the context of explaining to his disciples the indissolubility of marriage, Jesus took the opportunity to explain the “value of celibacy.” Celibacy for the kingdom of heaven, John Paul II asserted, represented a free choice on the part of the individual as well as a grace bestowed on the individual

by God. John Paul II granted that this understanding of celibacy applied equally to men and women choosing to live a consecrated life. However, he distinguished between the nature of celibacy as practiced by men and women. The celibacy of women, as a path to realizing womanhood, could be understood only with reference to Christian anthropology and the complementary spousal relationship: "At the same time they realize the personal value of their own femininity by becoming 'a sincere gift' for God who has revealed himself in Christ, a gift for Christ, the Redeemer of humanity and the Spouse of souls: a 'spousal' gift. One cannot correctly understand virginity—a woman's consecration in virginity—without referring to spousal love. It is through this kind of love that a person becomes a gift for the other. Moreover, a man's consecration in priestly celibacy or in the religious state is to be understood analogously."¹⁸⁸ Women's consecration in virginity was defined in terms of the woman's role as wife.

The same logic was used to exclude women from the priesthood: "The Bridegroom—the Son consubstantial with the Father as God—became the son of Mary; he became the 'son of man,' a true man, a male. *The symbol of the Bridegroom is masculine.*"¹⁸⁹ However, men could embody the symbolic role of bride: "In the Church every human being—male and female—is the 'Bride,' in that he or she accepts the gift of the love of Christ the Redeemer, and seeks to respond to it with the gift of his or her own person."¹⁹⁰

For John Paul II, understanding the nuptial relationship between Church and Christ as well as between man and woman made clear the reasons for Christ's selection of twelve male apostles; it had not been the product of social constraints, but the expression of the gendered division of labor willed by God:

Meditating on what the Gospels say about Christ's attitude toward women, we can conclude that as a man, a son of Israel, he revealed the dignity of the daughters of Abraham (cf. Lk 13:16), *the dignity belonging to women* from the very "beginning" on an equal footing with men. At the same time Christ emphasized the originality which distinguishes women from men, all the richness lavished upon women in the mystery of creation. Christ's attitude towards women serves as a model of what the Letter to the Ephesians expresses with the concept of "bridegroom." Precisely because Christ's divine love is the love of a Bridegroom, it is the model and pattern of all human love, men's love in particular. Against this broad background of the great mystery expressed in the spousal relationship between Church and Christ, it is possible to understand adequately the calling of the "Twelve."¹⁹¹

Mulieris Dignitatem received mixed reviews. The German Canadian theologian Gregory Baum noted in the international theological journal *Concilium* that John Paul II's hermeneutical approach to biblical texts led him to "interpretations that differ[ed] strikingly from the interpretations given by the Church Fathers and traditional teachings."¹⁹² Baum applauded the letter's recognition that "God is father and mother, that generativity has no gender, and that according to God's creation the man–woman relationship is not patriarchal."¹⁹³ However, the letter also contained contradictory statements. For example, in equating feminine genius with motherhood and the emulation of Mary, John Paul II seemingly excluded women from participating in church or society "as thinkers, inventors, initiators, presiders, and leaders."¹⁹⁴ Moreover, it made femininity a characteristic shared by women and men, but masculinity a trait possessed only by men.

The German Japanese feminist theologian Elisabeth Gössmann cautioned that scripture did not support John Paul II's one-sided application of nuptial symbolism: "The text does not argue from a biological perspective for the maleness of Christ, though of course this is implied, but argues symbolically—without distinguishing between the historic Jesus and the risen Christ, whom Paul declared the head vis-à-vis the 'body of the Church,' making him, together with his followers, a symbolic collective person, where sexuality has no role. Here it is clear that symbols and allegories have no absolute validity, but can be reciprocally imposed and even excluded. An obstruction of the Church's developmental potential through a one-sided attachment to such a symbol consequently is extremely alarming."¹⁹⁵ Other West German women also questioned John Paul II's biblical exegesis. In an article for the *KNA*, Irene Willig noted: "The symbolic meaning of the twelve apostles is not taken into account. The apostolic twelve and office in the Church are not differentiated; a historically documented development (of office) is not noted. It does not consider that Jesus accepted into the Twelve no Gentiles or others affiliated with any group besides the Jewish community."¹⁹⁶ The women's ordination group *Maria von Magdala* rejected the pope's historical-exegetical arguments and described women's exclusion from the priesthood as "apartheid at the altar."¹⁹⁷

The sharpest critiques of *Mulieris Dignitatem* came from theologians of the English-speaking world. Susan A. Ross contended that the nuptial relationship under John Paul II not only elided other symbolic representations of the Church, it had taken on new meanings that undermined gender equality and condemned homosexuality:

The Church's "feminine character"—as well as that of women human beings—has come to be emphasized far more than it had been before women's ordination became contentious, and when other metaphors such as People of God, field of God, edifice of God, the sheepfold, etc., were used more frequently. The nuptial metaphor has been used frequently in the Christian spiritual and mystical tradition, and it has most often illustrated intimacy and love between partners. It has not, for the most part, served as a prescriptive model for gender roles. . . . But in the present, femininity no longer has the more fluid meaning that was associated with it in the medieval period. The nuptial metaphor is now defined consciously and purposefully to prescribe gender roles—particularly in relation to the hierarchy and male priesthood—and implicitly to proscribe homosexual relations.¹⁹⁸

Tina Beattie claimed that this model for a gendered division of labor, which associated a myriad of gender identities with the male body but only one with the female body, constituted an act of violence against women, because "the female body has been effectively annihilated in the symbolic life of the Church."¹⁹⁹ She believed that the female body was eliminated from the suprasexual nuptial relationship between the Church and Christ "not in order to let man be man, but in order to let man be woman,"²⁰⁰ because "the only 'man' in creation is the priest who vicariously represents the masculine divinity of Christ, while all other men are in fact 'women' and 'brides' in their humanity."²⁰¹ Therefore, woman constituted "a threat to man's wholeness and autonomy before God" and must be effaced.²⁰²

Meanwhile German Catholic feminists continued to struggle to find an audience within the largest Catholic women's organization—the kfd. As one letter to the editor from September 1988 made clear, most kfd members were older and found it difficult to follow the new theological arguments concerning women's place in the Church that had begun appearing in *Frau und Mutter*: "We would like to ask you with respect to the presentation and selection of topics not to forget older readers. The fact is that the majority of our membership is older, and in their youth, they did not receive the education necessary to follow these texts and read them with pleasure and interest." When in February 1989 the editorial staff of *Frau und Mutter* invited members to submit their views on *Mulieris Dignitatem*, roughly three-quarters of the responses sent to the central office supported the papal position on ordination. However, because many letters were group submissions, the exact percentages of supporters and opponents of the papal position cannot be determined.²⁰³

The letters indicated a generational divide within the organization. Older members lamented the current state of affairs in church and society: "Although the present-day era likes to be so modern and feminist, we must conform to God's commandments and cannot expect the pope (actually an attempt to force the pope to his knees) to give us an alibi or adapt to the *Zeitgeist*."²⁰⁴ Another older member wrote: "Why would Catholic women fight for an office that Jesus allocated to men. . . . As modern women, we no longer take seriously our mission as guardians of life; we fail to see that in pursuing equality, we act against God and nature (the pill, abortion and unlimited sexual intercourse). . . . I feel that your association, of which I have been a member since 1954, no longer represents me as a Catholic woman."²⁰⁵ In contrast, younger members often expressed frustration with women's continued exclusion from the priesthood: "I find it shameful, even degrading, that because of my sex I cannot receive one of the seven sacraments."²⁰⁶ In 1993, a survey of women commissioned by the DBK indicated that 77 percent of young women felt that the Church did not understand the "concerns and problems of women today" (see Appendixes J and K).²⁰⁷ The Catholic Church could no longer assume the acquiescence of its core constituency—women.

. . .

The women's ordination debate did not end with *Mulieris Dignitatem*. In 1992, the Church of England announced it would accept women as priests. As in 1976, the pope responded to developments in the Anglican Church by reiterating the Catholic Church's ban. *Sacerdotalis Ordinatio*, released in 1994 by John Paul II, offered no new theological arguments for women's exclusion from the priesthood; however, strategically, it differed significantly from *Inter Insigniores* (1976) and *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988); it argued less from Christ's example and more from papal authority. The new approach had already been evident in the 1993 encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, in which the pope declared that the Church's teachings on morality could not be bent to accommodate modernity: "But the negative moral precepts, those prohibiting certain concrete actions or kinds of behaviour as intrinsically evil, do not allow for any legitimate exception. They do not leave room, in any morally acceptable way, for the 'creativity' of any contrary determination whatsoever."²⁰⁸ *Veritatis Splendor* advised bishops to take "appropriate measures" against dissenters in order to safeguard the faithful against "every doctrine and theory" contrary to the Church's teachings.²⁰⁹ With *Sacerdotalis Ordinatio*, John Paul II used the same tactic, declaring that women's

exclusion from the priesthood constituted Church doctrine that must be “definitively held by all the Church’s faithful.”²¹⁰

Like *Inter Insigniores*, *Sacerdotalis Ordinatio* only fueled the debate. As Thomas J. Reese noted in *Inside the Vatican*, Paul’s attempt to end the discussion only succeeded in angering more women.²¹¹ Feminists quickly mobilized resources, flooding Catholic publications with critiques of *Sacerdotalis Ordinatio*. But they were not alone; the Belgian Bishops’ Commission on Women and the Church questioned whether male exclusivity in the priestly office was compatible with equality of the sexes: “Since the power of ordination and the power of government are tied to each other, a reference to Mary does not really help, because the central question is not who can represent which ‘persona,’ but why the whole power of government has to hang on the representative who acts ‘in persona Christi.’ Criticism is not only levelled at the fact that men are allowed to lead in the Church because they are physically men, but also at the fact that they are allowed to dominate because they are allowed to lead.”²¹² As criticism mounted, the CDF took the unprecedented step of issuing a *Responsum* declaring *Sacerdotalis Ordinatio* an infallible teaching: “This teaching requires definitive assent, since, founded on the written Word of God, and from the beginning constantly preserved and applied in the Tradition of the Church, it has been set forth infallibly by the ordinary and universal Magisterium.”²¹³ The CDF statement sparked more controversy, even as the space for loyal opposition contracted.

Still, German opposition was growing. A 1992 Emnid survey commissioned by *Der Spiegel* showed that 70 percent of West Germans and 50 percent of Catholic churchgoers supported women priests (see Appendix M).²¹⁴ German rebellion did not go unnoticed by Vatican authorities. In 1999, John Paul II chastised the German Church for blurring the distinction between laity and clergy:

In your land, there is growing discontent with the Church’s attitude towards the role of women. . . . However, too little consideration is given to the difference between the human and civil rights of the person and his rights, duties and related functions in the Church. Precisely for this reason, some time ago, by virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren, I recalled “that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgement is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful.”²¹⁵

Three years later, the frustration of longtime supporters of ordination in Germany gave way to open rebellion. On June 29, 2002, an excommunicated

Catholic bishop ordained seven women from Germany, Austria, and the United States (Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger, Adeline Theresia Roitinger, Gisela Forster, Iris Müller, Ida Raming, Pia Brunner, and Angela White) aboard a chartered boat on the Danube River near the German–Austrian border.²¹⁶

The event generated banner headlines across the globe and polarized the Catholic women's ordination movement.²¹⁷ The woc enthusiastically supported the women; however, *Wir sind Kirche* in Austria and Germany, the *Initiativ Kirche von unten* in Germany, and the New Wine movement in Great Britain distanced themselves from the illegal ordinations. The CDF excommunicated the women and the presiding bishop (for a second time), but the harsh punishments did not act as a deterrent; more illegal ordinations followed in Germany, the United States, and elsewhere.²¹⁸

However, proponents of ordination were no closer to their goal than they had been in 1962, when Gertrud Heinzelmann submitted the first petition advocating women's ordination to the Second Vatican Council. Over the years, the Vatican position hardened, and stiff punishments were imposed for supporting ordination. In addition to the excommunication of women priests, disciplinary actions were taken against theologians who supported women's ordination. For example, Sister Carmel McEnroy, author of *Guests in Their Own Home*, was terminated as professor of systematic theology at St. Meinrad School of Theology in Indiana after signing a petition supporting women's ordination.²¹⁹

Under John Paul II, complementarity of the sexes in human relations and in the Church's understanding of its relationship to Christ gained greater prominence in Church teachings. The allegorical-typological argument against women in the priesthood introduced in *Inter Insigniores* and expanded by John Paul II in *Mulieris Dignitatem* transformed gender from a physical category into a metaphysical and theological category that determined the divine and earthly order. As critics pointed out, the multivalence of nuptial symbolism as found in the Bible was eclipsed in the Church's efforts to defend its traditional teachings on the male-only priesthood and its understanding of human marriage on the basis of sexual complementarity and reproduction.

But with the passage of time, fewer Catholics found the argument convincing. They believed that the Church's teachings on the priesthood and on marriage violated principles of social justice, arguing that subordination necessarily implied a devaluation of the person. In contrast, papal

supporters, such as the German theologian Manfred Hauke, argued that the feminist call for “undifferentiated access to every sort of task” led to “a death-dealing barbarism.”²²⁰ Feminism, he charged, “has, from the very start, promoted abortion . . . a more brutal form of ‘domination of man by man’—the charge brought against patriarchy by feminist theology—can hardly be imagined.”²²¹ The Catholic American journalist Donna Steichen claimed, “Whether or not any given feminist intends to serve the Prince of Lies, every progression more clearly reveals the cause itself as a demonic assault on God, on his creation, on the Church and on the family.”²²² The line between the Church’s ban on women’s ordination and its condemnation of artificial contraception, abortion, and reproductive technologies became increasingly blurred, as conservatives and Vatican officials retrenched.