Womanpriest

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The Feast of the Holy Family in December 2009, mere days after Christmas, was not my first experience with the Roman Catholic Womenpriests (RCWP) movement. Yet it was early enough in my research that I could not decide what to make of the womanpriest-led Mass at Therese of Divine Peace Inclusive Roman Catholic Community. Did this service remind me of the thousands of Catholic services I had attended throughout my life, or did it unsettle me because it was unlike the Catholicism I knew?

About twenty congregants had gathered on that Sunday evening. It was one of those cold winter days when a cloudless sky yields vibrant yellows, oranges, and reds as the sun sets. Inside the Hope Chapel of the First Unitarian Church in downtown St. Louis, Missouri, womanpriest Marybeth McBryan prepared to baptize her granddaughter, Chloe. RCWP had ordained McBryan to priesthood on November 1, All Saints Day, nearly two months earlier. Chloe, a spirited child with blond curls and a dark-green velvet dress, had just turned three on December 6. Chloe was the center of attention. Restless and curious, she often squirmed away from adult arms to explore the worship space in sparkling silver Mary Jane shoes.

Much like any other assembled community of Roman Catholics on this feast day, we sang seasonal songs like “The First Noel” and “Silent Night.” We heard readings from Sirach and Colossians, books in the Bible’s Old and New Testaments. We listened to the story from Luke’s Gospel about twelve-year-old Jesus teaching in the temple and becoming separated from his panicked parents. We offered prayers of the faithful, shared the sign of peace, and received the consecrated host and wine. These elements felt familiar to me.

Yet significant differences signaled that I was in new territory. The presiders were not iconic “Fathers” but rather three women: Elsie McGrath, Rose Marie Hudson, and McBryan. The small chapel’s circular arrangement of chairs
offered intimacy but didn’t have the fixed wooden pews, statues, tabernacle, elevated altar, or large crucifix that typically signal Catholic space. The womenpriests had modified familiar prayers to be gender inclusive. For example, the Our Father began “Our Mother, Our Father, who are in heaven, hallowed is your name.” Throughout this communal prayer, the word “kingdom” became “kin-dom,” removing images of male monarchical dominion. During the liturgy of the Eucharist, the congregants and womenpriests together held the power to consecrate bread and wine into body and blood. As such, instead of intoning, “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands, for the praise and glory of his name, for our good and the good of all his church,” these worshippers said, “May God accept these gifts from our hands, for the praise and glory of God’s name, for our good and the good of all the church.” Not only did this prayer over the gifts turn male language of “Lord” and “his” to the neutral “God,” but the sacrifice of bread and wine was at our hands, the community’s, and not just the priest’s.

“A baby changes everything!” Hudson’s homily began. Congregants chuckled and nodded, and Chloe, as if on cue, walked about, touching chairs and altar pieces, noticing the worshippers as they noticed her. Hudson’s reflections affirmed the challenges and rewards of parenting. She suggested that Mary and Joseph must have felt this way, too, as they watched Jesus grow. At age three, Chloe could watch, wonder, and wiggle. During the baptismal rite, McBryan whispered gently to her granddaughter, holding her hands while showing her the water, the baptismal font, and the oil of catechumens. McBryan’s emotion was palpable. At one point, as she prayed over Chloe, she began to cry, and she had to pause to collect herself. Moments later, she tenderly marked Chloe’s forehead with the sign of the cross, pushed the child’s curly bangs back from her face while she poured the water, and prayed the ages-old words of baptism.

Meanwhile, I could not stop the questions coming to mind. Would Chloe, unlike billions of Catholics throughout the world and across time, grow up without equating priests with men? Would her grandmother’s modeling suggest to her another way of envisioning Catholic authority? Could a celibate priest without children have spoken about parenthood with the same gravitas I felt in Hudson’s homily, as she drew upon her personal experiences as a wife, mother, and grandmother? Was Chloe’s baptism offering a different kind of sacrament because a grandmother-priest welcomed her flesh and blood into the church? What might be lost if a ritual becomes a family affair rather than a way of connecting a child to a broader religious community?
More questions arose during the distribution of the Eucharist. McBryan guided Chloe through the Communion line where McGrath distributed the hosts. McBryan received the Eucharist, and as she and Chloe turned toward the wine, Chloe began to fuss. McGrath interpreted Chloe’s displeasure as I did: the child wanted Communion. Without missing a beat, McGrath broke off a small part of the host. She tapped McBryan and handed it to her to give to Chloe. Chloe took the Eucharist from her grandmother and placed it in her mouth, and her fussing subsided. Had Chloe just celebrated her first Communion? I thought back to a Mass at Therese in July 2008, when Hudson had prefaced the serving of Communion with this announcement: “All are welcome at this table.” I had taken Hudson to mean that at Therese, all people gathered could take the Eucharist, even if they were not Roman Catholic by baptism. I had not anticipated, however, a three-year-old receiving Communion, since Catholic children do not traditionally receive their first Communion until age seven or eight. Spontaneous maternal instinct, it seemed, had won out over Catholic custom.

Did the womenpriests concern themselves at all with the church’s typical practices around first Communion? After all, the Roman Catholic Church had already excommunicated these three women: a May 2008 decree, issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), stated that all women who “attempted to receive Holy Orders” were excommunicated latae sententiae (automatically). The CDF argued that the women had excommunicated themselves by pursuing ordination. Even before that, McGrath and Hudson had been singled out and excommunicated ferendae sententiae (upon official notice) by then St. Louis archbishop Raymond Burke. According to Roman officials, everything womenpriests did sacramentally was invalid, a blasphemous “simulation of a sacrament.” If McGrath, McBryan, and Hudson were not “real” priests, then Chloe’s was not a “real” baptism, and the technicalities of her impromptu first Communion were moot because it was not a “real” Eucharist. Or, conversely, were the womenpriests “real,” as they and allies saw it, because they were ordained as priests, operated as priests, and were recognized by congregants as priests? It was early in my nearly ten years spent in the company of Roman Catholic womenpriests, and I could not stop the questions from coming to mind.

I knew some things already. I knew that many of the womenpriests’ most progressive liturgical and sacramental actions did not originate with RCWP, and I knew that other Catholic—but not “Roman Catholic”—groups ordained women. In fact, such practices had been in play for years in Europe and the United States. Intentional Eucharistic Communities (IECs), the Ecumenical
Catholic Communion (ECC), and some independent Catholic groups retain key elements of Catholic tradition and ordain women but are not in communion with Rome. Communities of women religious—or “nuns,” as they are often called—have long covertly celebrated the Eucharist without male priests. And I knew about Mary Ramerman, a Roman Catholic woman in Rochester, New York, who was ordained a priest in 2001. After her illegal ordination, Ramerman’s church, Spiritus Christi, left the Roman Catholic communion and became an independent Catholic church.

I also knew, however, that RCWP was doing something distinctive. I knew that RCWP’s public ordinations of women, combined with the womenpriests’ active ministries, all provocatively under the name “Roman Catholic,” invited a reexamination of contemporary Catholicism and questions about women in religious authority. This was a group I needed to study further.

**RCWP Emerges *Contra Legem***

The group that became known as Roman Catholic Womenpriests started in Europe in 2002. Its first public ordination took place on June 29, 2002, on a rented ship sailing the Danube River, when two male bishops ordained seven women to the priesthood. The movement came to North America on July 25, 2005, when three womanbishops ordained nine women on a boat on the St. Lawrence Seaway, four as priests and five as deacons. The first ordination within US boundaries occurred on July 31, 2006, when three womanbishops ordained twelve women, eight as priests and four as deacons, on the riverboat Majestic in Pittsburgh. Holding these early ordinations on rivers and waterways allowed the movement to control attendance and avoid diocesan jurisdiction.

All of the womanpriest ordinations were, in terms of Roman Catholic canon law, *contra legem*, “against the law.” Specifically, womenpriests violated canon 1024, which reads, “Only a baptized man can validly receive sacred ordination.” RCWP uses the same canon law to different, dissident ends. The movement acknowledges that it ordains women *contra legem* but defends doing so on the basis that canon 1024 is unjust. RCWP argues that when laws are unjust and contradict God’s calling of women to the priesthood, it is morally just to oppose such laws.

RCWP’s ordinations have continued in locations across the world, and the organization now comprises a number of branches and subgroups, including in regions of the United States, Canada, and Europe, and has ordained women in South America, South Africa, and (as of 2017) Taiwan. The Association of
Roman Catholic Women Priests (ARCWP) is a branch of the RCWP tree that formed a separate organization in 2010 and spans regional and international boundaries. In 2019, the entirety of the international womanpriest movement (including ARCWP and regions abroad) included 229 ordained individuals worldwide, most living in the United States and Canada. RCWP describes itself as a Roman Catholic reform movement that seeks to change Roman Catholicism from within, and their mission statement promises “a new model of ordained ministry in a renewed Roman Catholic Church.”

Women’s ordination activists have been asking for ordination since the last worldwide meeting of bishops in the Roman communion, known as the Second Vatican Council or Vatican II, which was held from 1962 to 1965 and resulted in a broad aggiornamento (updating) of church customs and theology for the modern world. This activism through formal channels has never been successful. Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis all have said that women’s ordination is not open to discussion and have further contended that women have never been ordained in Catholicism’s two-thousand-year history, a stance that many historians of Western Christianity find questionable. In 2016 Pope Francis created a papal commission to study the possibility of women joining the diaconate. The office of deacon is an ordained role preceding the office of priest; some deacons—aptly called “transitional deacons”—go on to become priests, while those who are members of the “permanent diaconate” can marry/be married. Yet Francis repeated his predecessors’ claims that only men could be ordained priests (even if women could be deacons) and added “that door is closed” to the question of including women in priesthood. Some have heard Francis as saying that the ban on women priests will stand “forever.”

Within the last half century, the ban on women priests (and most clerical marriage) has become more glaring partly because of the massive drop in numbers of US priests since Vatican II. In the US, there were 58,632 priests in 1965 but only 39,600 in 2013. The post–Vatican II decline creates ministerial challenges because there are fewer priests to pastor parishes and provide sacraments. Vocations are actually increasing in Africa and Asia, however, so to counter this distinctly Western problem, priests from non-English-speaking countries serve many North American Catholic parishes. American bishops have employed laypeople—including laywomen—as parish administrators for priestless parishes; they do many of the pastoral and administrative tasks of an ordained priest but not the sacramental work. Thus, Catholic officials are working to alleviate the declining vocations in North America and Europe and are willing
to use women administratively, even though they will not entertain the idea of ordaining women to priesthood.

Exacerbating the issue in the Western church are majorities of Roman Catholics who support the idea of ordaining women as priests. A 2015 Pew study on American Catholics and family life revealed that 59 percent of Catholics, 77 percent of cultural Catholics, and 66 percent of ex-Catholics support allowing women to be priests. These figures coincide with the 2015–2016 Gender and Religious Representation Survey, which found that 69.5 percent of surveyed American Catholics supported women’s ordination. A 2014 Univision survey, conducted by Bendixen & Amandi International, sampled Roman Catholics in the US, Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Argentina, France, Spain, Italy, Poland, the Philippines, Uganda, and Congo. In France, Spain, Argentina, Italy, Brazil, and (again) the United States, the majority of respondents showed a willingness to ordain women as priests. The divide between Europe and the Americas on the one hand and Africa and Asia on the other—on this issue and many others, including married priests and Communion for divorced Catholics—helps illustrate the challenges of a universal Catholicism when opinions diverge so widely around the world.

Into this contentious context steps Roman Catholic Womenpriests. RCWP agitates for women’s ordination and stands out from its activist predecessors: womenpriests do not ask for permission to become priests; they just do it. RCWP disagrees with Roman authorities both historically and pragmatically: the group invokes scholarship attesting to women’s ordination in early Christendom and argues that a return to ordained female leadership (and married clergy) is a commonsense way of addressing the current problem of declining vocations. Womenpriests believe that they must defy the official Catholic teaching that only men can be priests in order to restore and redeem the Roman Catholic Church. Womenpriests’ actions are designed to be controversial because they are constructing a new model of priesthood that invites new models for being Roman Catholic. The group’s very existence is an ongoing protest against official Catholic doctrine and offers an alternative Roman Catholic Church in the bodies of womenpriests.

Adding to the controversy, womenpriests assert that, despite their contra legem ordinations and official excommunications, they are still validly ordained. While they cannot study for priesthood in Roman Catholic seminaries, they take part in an RCWP-designed preparation program that requires a master of divinity degree or its equivalent. To ensure canonical validity, RCWP conducts ordinations “in the line of apostolic succession,” which Catholics understand
as an unbroken chain of ordination going back to Jesus’s apostles and which determines Catholic ordinations as ritually effective or “valid.” Womenpriests agree that their ordinations are illegal because they break canon law but argue that they are valid because they are in the line of apostolic succession. In Catholic theological and catechumenal discussions, this difference between valid and legal ordination basically means that, while everyone agrees that the Roman Catholic Church did not sanction the RCWP ordinations, there is more ambiguity about whether womenpriests have the ritual power to celebrate the sacraments on Roman terms.

Roman Catholic leadership says womenpriests definitely do not have the ritual power to celebrate sacraments. In fact, Rome’s official stance holds that even a valid ordination will not “work” on a woman because woman are not biologically male and only males can stand in persona Christi, that is, in the place of Christ as a sacramental minister of the church. Following John Paul II’s 1994 Ordinatio Sacerdotalis, Rome contends that it has “no authority whatsoever” to confer ordination on a woman, since it is Christ’s will and Roman Catholic tradition that priesthood be reserved for men alone. Rome holds that the matter is “definitively” and “authoritatively settled” and has condemned the women’s actions as heretical and schismatic.

But womenpriests’ actual congregations get past technical concerns around official status fairly quickly, as do many of RCWP’s allies across the Catholic world, including the historic Women’s Ordination Conference (founded in 1975), the leadership of the twenty-five-thousand-member lay organization Call to Action, the editorial staff of the National Catholic Reporter (an influential, liberal-leaning newspaper), and numerous other progressive Roman Catholic organizations. Like RCWP, these allies find the ban on women’s ordination unjust. They also recognize, very pragmatically, that womenpriests act as male priests do. They pray familiar prayers; they lead worship communities and perform sacraments; they minister to the oppressed and marginalized.

Womenpriests also act as male priests do not. They use gender-inclusive language. They reject clerical celibacy and preside over democratized communities. They embrace sexual diversity and therefore perform sacraments more widely than officially ordained priests, including officiating same-sex weddings. They do not pledge obedience to a bishop, nor do higher-ranking clerics determine their ministerial assignments. The movement does not pay its priests, nor can it afford to, and thus the women are “worker priests” who carve space for their priesthoods out of their existing lives and careers. The womenpriests wear vestments that are far simpler than those worn by male Roman Catholic priests.
Many womenpriests are married, some are lesbians, and most—like McBryan, McGrath, and Hudson—are mothers and grandmothers. All of this, they say, is part of enacting the changes that the Roman church desperately needs to preserve what is rich, true, and holy about Catholicism in contemporary times. These stances, too, give the RCWP movement admirers and points of connection with their congregations and allies.

Womenpriests do what they do because they hold two separate and seemingly opposing beliefs. While they believe that Roman Catholic traditions are too precious to lose, they also believe that Catholic women deserve the opportunity to serve the church through the ministerial priesthood. By getting ordained illegally and disobeying Vatican teachings, womenpriests are declaring that sacraments are important, priesthood is important, and the Roman Catholic faith is important. Quite simply, the RCWP movement believes that positive change for Roman Catholicism demands the inclusion of women in the priestly office.

As ordained women who see the official church rejecting their calls and claims to priesthood, womenpriests carry in their bodies, their histories, their educations, their ministries, and their sacramental actions a multitude of tensions confronting the contemporary Roman church. Whereas tens of thousands of American Catholics who want gender reform have left the Roman Catholic Church altogether, RCWP’s women have stayed. Whereas tens of thousands of Roman Catholics horrified by the sex-abuse crisis and frustrated by Rome’s slow pace of change have turned to Protestant Christianity, womenpriests have doubled down on the value of Roman Catholicism. Whereas other Catholic feminists have used academic and theological arguments to challenge Roman authority, RCWP’s women have put protest action front and center. In short, womenpriests are distinctive, and they offer a window onto the most fraught discussions within Western Roman Catholicism today.

Indeed, one is not excommunicated unless one has provoked authority at the deepest level, pushing boundaries deemed too dangerous to cross. Though a small movement, RCWP joins the multitudes of liberal Catholics who have claimed since Vatican II that the church is not limited to its clerical leaders but rather is made up of the whole “people of God.”24 Using their claimed authority as “people of God,” the RCWP movement has ordained women separate from Roman leaders’ approval—and Rome has pushed back. For that reason, even though Roman power is vast and RCWP is tiny, these two entities exist in a symbiotic relationship: like a small moon orbiting a larger planet, RCWP exerts
force on Rome just as Rome exerts force on RCWP, with both bodies pushing and pulling. To understand either, you have to understand the mutual force between them.

For nearly ten years, I studied the Roman Catholic Womenpriest movement and its congregations in order to understand how and why this push and pull is unfolding now, in the third millennium of Western Roman Catholicism. This book attempts to answer the questions that started when I witnessed young Chloe’s baptism and first Communion at an RCWP Mass. Womanpriest is my journey of discovery about a movement that uniquely illuminates contemporary Roman Catholicism as a whole.

Three main questions came to shape my research. First, why do womenpriests want to be ordained? Certainly, Roman Catholic priesthood today is a vocation under siege, largely because of the sex-abuse crisis and the hierarchical power malfeasance the crisis has laid bare. The title alone of a 2013 book by former Jesuit seminarian Garry Wills—Why Priests? A Failed Tradition—shows present-day suspicion of priesthood. This does not stop womenpriests, however; in fact, it invigorates them. I argue that womenpriests want to be ordained to save their relationship with their church, with their idea of Catholicism, and with their God. Although decades of Catholic feminists have tried other strategies—including lay ministries, experimenting with Protestantism, becoming women religious (that is, sisters or “nuns”), or working with Women’s Ordination Conference (WOC) and other Catholic reform groups—none of these options gave RCWP’s women the spiritual, religious, and social justice sustenance that they believe priesthood does. Womenpriests’ Catholic identity comes through a participatory—and often fraught—performance of female-embodied priesthood.

Second, what can womenpriests’ actions as creative agitators reveal about contemporary Roman Catholicism? Opponents of women’s ordination might dismiss RCWP as anathema, but my research shows that womenpriests display deference for much of Catholic tradition. RCWP retains Catholic rituals, Catholic sacraments, a ministerial priesthood, and the priest’s ability to stand in persona Christi, all while calling upon institutional Roman Catholicism to minister differently, imagine differently, and be, in the womenpriests’ view, more prepared to survive the current challenges to its reputation and membership. RCWP’s reimagined Catholicism requires us to take a new look at contemporary Catholicism’s ways of negotiating authority.

Finally, how can womenpriests’ form of protest (specifically, contra legem ordinations resulting in excommunication) illuminate the challenges surrounding religious change in and beyond Roman Catholicism? Certainly, religious
innovation is commonplace today: if someone does not like the options before them, they can look elsewhere or even create something new. RCWP’s women are a splinter group that wants to remain connected to the original; with their contra legem actions, womenpriests telegraph a desire to remain part inside and part outside, standing at a transition between what was and what is still being imagined. In doing so, they must navigate a myriad of challenges: organizational, structural, interpersonal, theological, sacramental. Womenpriests’ struggles illustrate the messy discursive practices of “doing” religious change, in Roman Catholicism and beyond.

As I argue throughout this book, RCWP straddles transgression and tradition, sometimes strategically, sometimes unintentionally. By ordaining women as priests, the group defiantly transgresses canon law and Roman Catholic tradition; yet as priests, transgressively ordained, the women enact many traditional elements of Catholic worship. RCWP picks and chooses which elements of their faith tradition to emphasize and which to jettison. Of course, all Catholics (and all religious people) do this, too, whether they recognize it or not; womenpriests are significant because they do this as priestly leaders of their vision for Roman Catholicism. This dialectic of the traditional and the transgressive marks RCWP’s complicated relationship with the Roman Catholic Church, but it also makes RCWP an invaluable case study for how all people of faith navigate vast, internally diverse traditions and handle religious change, particularly when they are in some way marginalized within their faith communities.

Spending Time with Womenpriests

*Womanpriest* is an ethnography of the RCWP movement, meaning my main approach to learning about womenpriests involved listening to their stories, participating in their liturgies, and reading their literature. In this book, I focus mainly on American and Canadian womenpriests during the group’s first decade in North America. I look at the ways RCWP inhabits tensions around gender, priesthood authority, and religious change, and I analyze the actions and explanations of these women who defied canon law to become ordained priests. This project is not a work of theology, and yet I watched and analyzed womenpriests’ theologies, including the embodied theologies womenpriests live out through their priesthoods.

As I spent time with womenpriests and their congregations, I realized that I would learn the most in a dialogical relationship between researcher and subject. Because as a researcher I would interpret findings and influence readers,
I hoped all the more to allow each subject to become an evolving presence of her own. RCWP’s women do not speak with one voice—in fact, they differ in their theology, activism, and motivations—so I hoped to make room for all these differences, as messy as that might make my conclusions. And Womanpriest’s conclusions inevitably reflect my presence as ethnographer: on more than one occasion, women would report to me that a question I asked during the interview had moved them to reconsider an idea or practice. Rather than pretending that either my outsider expertise or their insider experience was sufficient, with this dialogue model I aimed to blend both perspectives for a richer account.29

Staying aware of my own position as an ethnographer seemed all the more important to me because the first RCWP news story I encountered touched me so personally. I began studying Roman Catholic Womenpriests in the fall of 2007 when Elsie McGrath and Rose Marie Hudson’s actions captured my attention. As a native St. Louisan and “cradle Catholic” with seven years of education in Catholic schools, I learned from family and friends in my hometown about the controversy surrounding McGrath and Hudson’s November 2007 ordination to priesthood. The story dominated local television and newspapers, and although I was in graduate school some eight hundred miles away, it seemed a story worth following. As the ordination date approached, St. Louis’s archbishop, Raymond Burke, threatened to excommunicate McGrath, Hudson, and the ordaining womanbishop, Patricia Fresen.30 Burke was none too popular with progressive Catholics in the area, and the RCWP ordination offered some Catholics a sense of schadenfreude at Burke’s expense. Then, as the story spread beyond the Catholic community, a local reform Jewish synagogue, Central Reform Congregation (CRC), offered to host the illicit ordination (because no Catholic church could). Some of my relatives were active CRC members, and I knew of and respected Rabbi Susan Talve immensely. Archbishop Burke publicly chastised Rabbi Talve and insisted that her openness to RCWP would harm Jewish-Catholic relations throughout St. Louis. This contention amid interfaith cooperation, dramatically taking place between two religious communities to which I felt connected, drew me in.

Honoring the women’s stories and spiritual disclosures while balancing my own position became one of this project’s greatest challenges—but also an exhilarating dance. So much of what RCWP’s women described was familiar to me as a Catholic progressive and a woman. Yet nearly every womanpriest I spoke to was one or two generations older than I, and they’d been struggling creatively with their Catholicism since long before I was born. Unlike these women, I had never experienced a call to the priesthood. I did not risk excommunication,
familial ire, or loss of my home parish to pursue my scholarship. The fact that I have spent years studying this group suggests correctly that I sympathize with a feminist vision for the Roman Catholic Church, but I have long thought there are myriad ways for the church to become more progressive, the ordination of women being only one of them. As a scholar of religion, I tend to sight everything critically, including my own and others’ personal experiences, so I continuously kept in mind how struggles against sexism and patriarchy had shaped the individuals I studied. Although most (though not all) womenpriests so far are white, middle-class women with at least a master’s degree, and as such are privileged in certain ways, I also knew that their contra legem ordinations were a concerted response to the authoritative forces that shaped their Catholic lives. And because critics often dismissed womenpriests before even hearing them out, I knew that listening and understanding would be my first job if I wanted to tell a full story.

Interviews made up the backbone of my research. I interviewed thirty-five individuals between 2009 and 2014. Of these, thirty were women ordained through RCWP and belonged to RCWP-USA, ARCW P, RCWP-Canada, or RCWP in Europe. Interviews that took place in person or over the phone typically lasted anywhere from one to two and a half hours. Some were conducted in writing (e.g., via email) if that was what the interviewee preferred. For all interviews, my questions offered only a starting point, and I encouraged respondents to take the interview where their ideas pulled them. A full list of interviews and the initial interview questions can be found in this book’s appendices.

As part of my fieldwork, I attended RCWP services and sacraments whenever possible, taking notes on what I observed and reflecting on my role as an ethnographic presence and participant. I attended four ordinations between 2009 and 2013, Chloe’s baptism in 2009, and Masses in seven different RCWP communities in different parts of the United States. Because womenpriests cannot celebrate Mass in Roman Catholic churches, they create worship spaces in living rooms or non-Catholic churches and chapels. I often helped the women set up for liturgy, placing candles and altar cloths, laying out worship aids and music books. At Mass’s end, I helped in the disassembly. When asked, I read intercessory prayers at Mass or carried offertory gifts. I joined in the concelebration of the Eucharist with all congregants. I welcomed the women’s prayers for my work; likewise, at their request, I prayed for them and their ministries. I invited friends and family to attend RCWP Masses with me. I gratefully accepted womenpriests’ help finding lodging when I traveled for research. I shared meals with the women. I spent nights in their homes.
In order to connect with women priests I had not interviewed, as well as revisit past interviewees, I conducted two online surveys in the summer of 2014. The first was designed for women ordained through RCWP and ARCWP. Thirty-five people filled this out. The second survey aimed to collect stories and experiences from women priests’ congregants. Thirty people answered this survey. The questions I asked in these surveys can be found in appendices B and C, respectively.

I also found other ways to capture the voices of women priests, their communities, and their critics. The single most invaluable resource aside from my interviews was the more than one hundred hours of footage that went into the making of Pink Smoke over the Vatican, a 2011 documentary by filmmaker Jules Hart. This raw footage included thirty-two interviews with twenty-seven different people, including women priests and candidates for ordination, spouses and supporters, critics and congregants. I got access to Pink Smoke’s raw footage from Hart herself, who sent a box of video cassettes to my home. In addition, the 2008 book Women Find a Way offered personal stories and testimonies from twenty-five ordained women during a time when the nascent movement was beginning to explode with new members, creating questions about identity and objectives. The 2014 RCWP-published booklet Here I Am. I Am Ready: A New Model of Ordained Ministry combined photographs with a history and timeline.

Other primary and secondary sources enriched my research. When I attended RCWP’s Masses, I collected worship aids and bulletins; I noted liturgical changes and modified song lyrics and prayer language; I recorded homilies and community announcements. Some worship communities invited me to join their listservs, and there I “overheard” conversations on topics ranging from next week’s liturgical assignments to potluck preparations to prayer requests for sick members. One of the women priests shared with me her program of preparation for ordination, the RCWP educational curriculum that she was using as she moved into the diaconate and then the priesthood. Many women priests sent me—often over email—items like homilies, personal mission statements, photographs, and local news articles.

The movement has a vast online presence. RCWP’s website and, later, ARCWP’s offered valuable starting places with biographies of the ordained women, footage from ordination ceremonies, news reports on RCWP ordinations, and promotional videos. A by-product of diverse opinions about the movement’s direction, RCWP’s document titled “Constitution and Operating Structures” was often amended during my research, but the website typically contained the latest available version. Additionally, RCWP strategically uses
online video to make visible womenpriests’ existence, and I was able to watch several liturgies and ordinations online. ARCWP created a Facebook page, and I followed its regular posts starting in 2011; RCWP-USA followed suit a few years later. These social media and public relations efforts show how womenpriests seek to direct discourse about their movement.

Criticism of RCWP was also essential to my research. Some progressive Catholics have criticized RCWP for conservatively upholding the priesthood or not fully crediting past Catholic feminist activism, and so I situated RCWP amid these intellectual, theological, and activist histories. Some conservative Catholics have criticized RCWP for transgressing church law and tradition, and so I immersed myself in official Roman Catholic teachings on the ministerial priesthood and theological anthropologies of gender. Copies of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and *The Code of Canon Law* were always close at hand during my analysis, as were papal encyclicals and decrees from the CDF. Whenever possible, I sought to hear the voices arguing against women’s ordination and RCWP’s validity. This meant, for instance, learning about the Roman church’s stance on women’s ordination not just from progressive women like Deborah Halter, author of *The Papal “No”* and a former president of the Women’s Ordination Conference, but also from conservative women like Sister Sara Butler, author of *The Catholic Priesthood and Women: A Guide to the Teaching of the Church* and a theology professor at St. Joseph’s Seminary in New York City.

Yet actual interviews with conservative Catholic critics proved difficult to come by.35 This is understandable. If John Paul II’s 1994 *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* is to be the definitive word on women’s ordination, and if the May 2008 general decree deepened the finality of the hierarchy’s “no” to ordaining women, then it makes sense that Roman leaders would feel they could say little in public beyond reiterating the church’s stance. But while this limited my possible ethnographic subjects, criticism from church leaders abounds throughout this study, found in print sources (e.g., diocesan newspapers, letters to the diocese and local churches), online sources (e.g., priests’ blogs), and interviews (e.g., *Pink Smoke* documentary footage with ordained men).

**A Word on Terminology**

I am calling RCWP-ordained women “womenpriests,” but RCWP does not have formal terms, and even the womenpriests themselves vary in self-naming. Consider Elsie McGrath’s definition from 2011: “[Rose Marie Hudson and I] call ourselves priests. When using the proper title, it is Roman Catholic
womenpriests because we were ordained through the Roman Catholic Womenpriests initiative. When speaking in general, we are women priests because we are priests and we are women.” McGrath’s response shows that the women are thoughtful about their titles; it does not show that all women are in agreement.

Throughout this book, I use womanpriest and womenpriests—without the space between words—to describe the ordained women because the primary North American movement is called Roman Catholic Womenpriests, and because a majority of the women call themselves “womenpriests.” Moreover, womanpriest offers specificity that terms priest and woman priest do not, because priest includes ordained men and woman priest includes women who are ordained as priests in other Christian traditions, such as Episcopalian and Lutheran. As RCWP does, I sometimes use womenpriests as a catchall term to describe all of the women in the movement, some of whom are priests but others of whom are deacons or bishops.

There are more disclaimers. First, there are men in RCWP, if relatively few (six in early 2019). From the start of RCWP’s time in North America, spokespersons often talked about ordaining those Roman Catholic men who, like called women, could not be ordained: this included men who were openly gay or married. Second, the first openly transgender, nonbinary priest was ordained through RCWP in February 2020. Although this incredibly significant development happened long after my research ended, we must acknowledge that the RCWP movement is now growing in this direction and will continue to challenge familiar terminology around gender and priesthood. Third, the RCWP-ARCWP split in 2010 also complicates naming, since ARCWP tends to make the term two words (woman priest). ARCWP and RCWP remain informally connected and largely amicable, but there are differences I explore later in more detail. Throughout this book, when I use RCWP to refer to the entirety of the Roman Catholic womenpriests’ movement around the world, I am to some extent eliding womenpriests and men, RCWP and ARCWP, but I do make the distinction when it’s relevant to my analysis. With some misgivings, I decided that using womenpriests and RCWP as shorthand for everyone was warranted because Roman Catholic womenpriests who are women still comprise the majority of the international movement that started on the Danube River in 2002.

Roman Catholic is also a complicated term. In fact, the complexity and contestation of that term lies at the heart of this book, because the RCWP movement reimagines Roman Catholicism as it reimagines Catholic priesthood. Womenpriests provocatively understand themselves as standing in the Roman Catholic tradition, and they have named their movement accordingly. The RCWP
movement deliberately positions itself against the canonical Roman Catholic Church and all the popes, cardinals, archbishops, bishops, and priests that uphold it—all the while claiming to be part of that same faith system. Indeed, the womenpriests’ own rhetoric creates a particular idea of “the church,” just as the womenpriests are cast as heretics, schismatics, and excommunicants in critics’ pronouncements. Of course, the “Roman Catholic Church” is not just one monolithic thing, nor does the “Roman Catholic Church” do things; rather, the pope, the curia (administrators who assist in church governance), the magisterium (the church’s teaching authority), ecumenical councils (international meetings between the pope and bishops), and so on do things. These entities speak for the Roman Catholic Church and sometimes claim to be speaking as the Roman Catholic Church. Sociologists recognize this as the micro-macro problem, where institutional structures are anthropomorphized and take human verbs.

This poses research challenges, as most scholars of contemporary Catholicism—myself included—would prefer to uphold the diversity of opinions in Catholicism today, among both leaders and laity. As illuminating recent studies like Julie Byrne’s on Independent Catholics have shown us, Roman Catholics are only one type of Catholic—there exist numerous groups that resemble Roman Catholicism and use the name Catholic but who claim (or want) no connection to Rome. And still, the church in Rome often seeks to speak and act as a monolith with a unified voice—over and above the multiplicity of Catholic perspectives. It is all the more important, then, that I am clear at the outset about what I, as author, mean by Roman Catholic.

For my part, I often streamline my prose by using “Roman Catholic Church,” “institutional church,” “Roman church,” “church official(s),” “Vatican,” and “Rome” as umbrella terms that capture the actions and utterances of the Roman Catholic Church’s governing structures. These words describe the Catholic tradition that traces itself through the papal line. This authorial choice shows my attempt to name concisely the colossal entity that boasts over one billion members and claims a two-thousand-year history. But let the objection be noted: discussing the “Roman Catholic Church” can be problematic, not least of all because one of the primary challenges in today’s Roman Catholic world is finding suitable answers to the question, “Who is the church?” Vatican officials will publicly contend that “the true church” comprises faithful members who regularly receive the sacraments and honor Rome’s teaching authority, doctrines, and decrees. Women who claim to be ordained Catholic priests break this mold, all the while claiming to be a faithful part of Roman Catholicism. The back-and-forth continues, with no clean answers.
Book Chapters

In Chapter 1, “Called,” I use three womenpriests’ call-to-priesthood narratives to analyze the rhetorical moves RCWP’s members make in interviews and personal reflections. In telling these stories, womenpriests make God a main character and place divine wisdom over and against Vatican authority in knowing the women’s suitability for priesthood. Call stories introduce the womenpriests, their understanding of God, and their multilayered relationships with Catholicism.

Chapters 2 and 3 work in tandem to lay the contextual foundations and ongoing challenges for the RCWP movement. In Chapter 2, “Rome’s Mixed Messages,” I show that, when placed in context, Rome’s insistence on a male-only priesthood did not come about in a straightforward fashion. The late twentieth century, in fact, featured much back-and-forth between feminist activists and Roman leadership, and women demanding ordination sought to situate their faith within rapidly shifting social and theological contexts. I argue here that RCWP emerged in part from feminist Catholics’ frustrations surrounding their church leaders’ ambiguous words and actions.

Chapter 3, “Conflict and Creativity,” locates RCWP within contemporary Catholic struggles (primarily in North America and Europe) that convinced RCWP’s founders and members that Roman Catholicism needs women as priests, immediately. With American Catholic demographic trends in view, this chapter examines womenpriests’ appeal to disgruntled Catholics and unpacks the specific challenges facing the RCWP movement. These conflicts highlight successes as well as fractures in RCWP and present questions about Roman Catholic identity in the early twenty-first century.

Chapter 4, “Ordination,” uses the performative complexity layered in RCWP’s ordination ceremonies to analyze how RCWP understands itself as a reform movement and what transformations it envisions for Roman Catholicism. There is more than apostolic succession at stake here, and ordinations put womenpriests in tension with the Vatican, with feminist theologians who claim that “ordination is subordination,” and with the contentious history of women’s ordination throughout Christendom. As I argue in Chapter 4, RCWP uses *contra legem* ordination to ordain women as priests and, perhaps even more significantly, to position the movement publicly and provocatively within debates about women and church authority.

Chapter 5, “Sacraments,” explores the shifting meaning of sacraments in the hands of womenpriests and their worship communities. By eschewing a strict lay-clergy divide, womenpriests try to shift the traditional Catholic sacramental
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economy toward the community gathered—and not toward the ordained womanpriest. This chapter also analyzes a tension around sacramental efficacy within RCWP’s own membership: some women believe wholly in mystery and ontological change through the apostolic line, while others believe that sacramental power comes from a worship community’s intent and faithfulness. As dispensers of grace, then, RCWP’s sacraments give what womenpriests and their congregants want and need—not necessarily what Rome would dictate.

Chapter 6, “Ministries on the Margins,” analyzes RCWP’s ministerial actions and language of marginality in order to highlight both challenges and opportunities for womenpriests. I examine how womenpriests have carved out ministerial lives as “worker priests,” and I show how RCWP’s perceived marginalization has led womenpriests to forge links and build relationships with Protestants and male Catholic priests. Thus, RCWP’s language of marginalization is simultaneously empowering and obfuscating.

Bodies and embodied performances of priesthood feature throughout the book, but Chapter 7 specifically analyzes the implications of womenpriests’ bodies as symbols for social justice and resisting sexism. “Bodies in Persona Christi” considers the distrust facing Catholic priests’ bodies today—specifically because of the sex-abuse crisis—alongside womenpriests’ potential as female-bodied priests to reposition the gendered, sexual, and sacred natures of Catholic priesthood. Yet tension exists here as well: while the womenpriests seek to overcome Roman prohibitions on women’s ordination, which are primarily located in Catholic theological anthropology, womenpriests often use gender complementarity and essentialism as proof that the church needs ordained women. And so, I argue, while Catholic womenpriests may ultimately have the potential to generate new discourse on priesthood and gendered authority (that is, to “queer” priesthood), RCWP’s women currently fall short of fully dismantling associations between priesthood and gender. Where womenpriests do succeed is in modeling new theological images and changing congregants’ experiences of priesthood.

By focusing sequentially on womenpriests’ calls to priesthood, RCWP’s emergence and struggles, ordination ceremonies, the movement’s sacramental actions and ministerial endeavors, and the embodiment of priesthood, Womanpriest places RCWP in ever-widening concentric circles that demonstrate the movement’s significance for the women themselves, for twenty-first-century Catholicism, and for patterns of religious change. In these early years of the movement’s existence, RCWP’s ordained are struggling to discover what it means to be female Catholic priests. In embarking on this theological and sacramental
social justice experiment, they navigate the pressing issues facing contemporary Catholics: conflicting understandings of Catholic tradition, the place of sacred mystery, the role of sacraments in Catholic life, the way priests can best minister to suffering Catholics, and women’s leadership in Catholic traditions. However controversial their journey, womenpriests believe this is what God is calling them to do.