1. Called

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Chapter 1
Called

When she was a child, Victoria Rue played priest. Growing up as the oldest of eight in a “good Catholic family” in Downey, California, the young Rue distributed Necco Wafers to neighborhood children. She would place the chalky candy discs upon her playmates’ tongues in imitation of the pre–Vatican II practice of the time. As an adult, Rue recalls this practice with much animation and vocal inflection—she is, after all, according to her partner Kathryn Poethig, a “theater person.” Rue believes this childhood game was an early sign of God calling her to priestly ministry.¹

Other Roman Catholic Womenpriests (RCWP) women tell similar stories. When she was six years old, Juanita Cordero also reenacted the Communion ritual with Necco Wafers. When she was five years old, Gabriella Velardi Ward played Mass and told family members that she would be a priest when she grew up. Mary Grace Crowley-Koch led fellow preschoolers in Eucharistic celebrations at age four. Kathleen Kunster was not raised Catholic, but as a child she learned about Roman Catholicism during her school’s required religious education lessons. She played Mass with the young boy next door, who wore his brother’s cassock and informed Kathleen she could never be a priest. Her solution: she would play the Virgin Mary. In retrieving their girlhood memories, these women weave narratives of call and use their childhood behavior to help explain why they disobeyed canon law and became ordained through the RCWP movement.²

This book begins with call narratives, where so many womenpriests start their stories. In conducting interviews and reading womenpriests’ autobiographies, I quickly found that women loved talking about their journeys to RCWP. I also found that, despite initial appearances, these stories are not simple feel-good reflections. Instead, they are deeply layered accounts that serve to argue for women’s ordination.

With their passion for telling their call narratives, womenpriests show not only that they believe God has summoned them to contra legem ordination but
Also that they trust the rhetorical power these stories can have on an audience. As this chapter will show, call narratives do many things. Telling stories of God’s call empowers the women to control their own stories, counters Rome’s refusal to accept that women can be called to priesthood, minimizes womenpriests’ reputation as lawbreakers, and casts them as obedient to God’s voice and not to man-made rules.

Honoring the Call, Not the Church

Victoria Rue’s journey from child priest distributing wafer candies to woman-priest celebrating Eucharist was not without detours. As a young woman, she entered the Sisters of the Holy Names, a teaching order of women religious, but departed after a year. Thereafter, the theater became her congregation and the women’s movement became her church. These passions carried her to Nicaragua, where she experienced Catholic social teaching and liberation theology in action. She went on to study liberation and feminist theologies at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. After then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger issued the “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons” in October 1986, which called homosexuality a “moral disorder,” Rue got involved in liturgical protests with the lesbian and gay community. She pursued a doctorate at the University of California, Berkeley, where her work merged theology, theory, feminism, and her artistic endeavors. In the Bay Area, she cofounded A Critical Mass: Women Celebrating the Eucharist, a group that gathered monthly in a public park to feed the homeless and celebrate a feminist-inspired liturgy.

In summer 2002, Rue learned of the womanpriest developments in Europe, where seven women had been ordained by male bishops on the Danube River. Knowing this option was now available to her, Rue began a discernment process. She concluded that she was being called, and a contra legem ordination followed. She was ordained a deacon in summer 2004 and a priest in summer 2005. Why be ordained? Rue told me, “It was an opportunity to claim what I had already been living and [was] called forth to be.”

Honoring the call came with challenges. As for all of RCWP’s ordained, no Roman Catholic parish awaited Rue’s sacramental ministry, so Rue had to be creative: she had to identify need, offer her services, and hope a community formed. In February 2006, she began a weekly Eucharist at the nondenominational chapel at San Jose State University, where she taught classes in gender and religion. She often celebrated these Masses with others, including Don
Cordero (a married Catholic priest who was her ordination mentor), Juanita Cordero (Don’s wife and a womanpriest), and Kathleen Kunster (another womanpriest). The liturgy attracted students from SJSU as well as nearby Santa Clara University, a Jesuit institution that would not have permitted Rue to celebrate on campus.

Despite (or maybe because of) Rue’s energy and enthusiasm, problems began. Signs advertising Rue’s weekly services were defaced or torn down. New signs appeared, condemning Rue’s actions. The Diocese of San Jose instructed local parishes to publish warnings in weekly bulletins, informing parishioners that Rue’s liturgies were invalid and must be avoided. When Rue sought an audience with the bishop, she was told there were “no grounds for dialogue” so long as she continued to call herself a Roman Catholic priest. Rue’s excommunication from the institutional church became finalized in May 2008, when the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s general decree announced that RCWP’s womanpriests had all excommunicated themselves by attempting to become priests.5

Young girls who play with these rituals show how readily Catholic ideas and images take hold. Adult women who perform sacraments, however, defy Catholic dogma. As the girls become women, play becomes protest—and the stakes get higher. Of all of her faith-centered actions, from studying feminist theology to working with gay and lesbian Catholics to starting a liturgical community in an Oakland park, it was Rue’s priesthood ordination and sacramental ministry that riled the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Rue’s story reveals how seriously the Vatican takes an adult woman’s seeking illicit ordination and calling herself a priest.

This is because the Roman Catholic Church teaches not only that men alone can be priests but that men alone are called to priesthood. In 1976, Inter Insigniores addressed the issue of women feeling called to priesthood: “Women who express a desire for the ministerial priesthood are doubtless motivated by the desire to serve Christ and the Church.” Furthermore,

it is sometimes said and written in books and periodicals that some women feel they have a vocation to the priesthood. Such an attraction, however noble and understandable, still does not suffice for a genuine vocation. In fact a vocation cannot be reduced to a mere personal attraction, which can remain purely subjective.6

Honoring a vocational call to the priesthood is fundamental for womanpriests, who have felt pain from Rome rejecting their call’s authenticity. The Catechism states that “Church authority alone has the responsibility and right to call someone to receive the sacrament of Holy Orders” (emphasis mine).
In telling their call stories, womenpriests claim that only God has the authority to determine their suitability for priesthood, subverting Roman authority in the process. These stories also construct an essentialist narrative by arguing that these women had, from childhood, an innate, God-directed pull toward the church, the sacraments, and ministerial priesthood. This counters the gender essentialism in Roman Catholic theology, which says only men have the intrinsic characteristics needed for the priestly role. In telling their stories now, as illicitly ordained womenpriests, these women cast off Roman Catholic rules about an all-male priesthood and instead cast their lot with God: God has called them, loud and clear. To deny God’s call—to not become priests, as God has summoned them to—would be the true crime. Breaking canon law and being excommunicated are secondary.

Embodying Tradition and Transgression

It was January 17, 1998, and Janice Sevre-Duszynska’s forty-eighth birthday. Believing herself called to Catholic priesthood, Sevre-Duszynska readied her body. She put on an alb and cincture that she had ordered from a Protestant supply store. She covered herself in a coat. She went to Christ the King Cathedral in her hometown of Lexington, Kentucky, where an ordination was taking place. She sat in a pew. And when the presiding bishop asked the candidates for ordination to come forward, Sevre-Duszynska took off her coat and walked to the altar. She said, “Bishop Williams, I’m called by the Holy Spirit to present myself for ordination. My name is Janice. I ask this for myself and for all women.” She then prostrated herself.

She knelt “for a minute or so,” she recalled when she told her story. When she stood, she spoke again: “I am all the oppressed women of the Bible. I am Sarah, I am Elizabeth, I am the woman who touched the hem of Jesus’s garment, I am the woman who poured the oil over Jesus’s head, I am Veronica. I came here today with the help of my patron saint, St. Joan of Arc, hoping that you would ordain me. Would you ordain me?”

Sevre-Duszynska remembered the bishop growling at her in a voice that reminded her of Darth Vader. She was instructed to return to her seat and stop disrupting the service. She remembered a cadre of ordained men surrounding her, ready to escort her back to her seat—with force, perhaps, if necessary. After her speech—her sermon, her declaration, her petition—she returned to her space in the pew. During the sign of peace, many moments later, the same bishop approached her and hugged her, and she hugged him in return. It was, it seems, a
brief moment of reconciliation between two representatives of Catholic calls to priesthood: the patriarchal male gatekeeper and the aspirational activist.

At this ceremony, Sevre-Duszynska showed her reverence for the tradition of sacramental ordination as well as her willingness to transgress institutional teaching. Acknowledging ordination’s power to transform laypeople into priests, she selected this sacred occasion to petition Roman Catholic leaders and protest the all-male priesthood. Sevre-Duszynska’s “gentle action” in Lexington, as she called it, was neither her first nor her last. She also witnessed at annual meetings for bishops, calling out to the men as they moved between sessions, “Bishops, remember to speak out for us women! Remember that Christ calls both men and women to the priesthood!”

She also recalled a time when Cardinal George of Chicago said to her, “Janice, you are not a Catholic,” to which she replied, “I think Jesus would be doing this, too.” Sevre-Duszynska explained that her history of activism stemmed from her understanding of Jesus and the incarnation. Her Jesus became human, took on a flesh-and-blood body, and had to accept the bodily consequences of his actions. It followed, then, that she saw priesthood as laying down one’s body, one’s life, for one another, as Christ did. Sevre-Duszynska has said of the Roman Catholic Church and its ministry, “It’s not just statements and encyclicals. It’s putting your bodies on the line.” She has done just that: put her body on the line to protest the Roman Catholic Church’s refusal to ordain women.

In 2008, ten years after Lexington, Sevre-Duszynska became one of RCWP’s illegally ordained womenpriests. My interviews and research around Sevre-Duszynska revealed how her lifelong Catholicism drew her to such dramatic action. She described feeling called to priesthood from an early age. Growing up on Milwaukee’s south side during the 1950s, she longed to be an altar server. But that role was strictly reserved for boys, and women were forbidden from the altar during the liturgy. Instead, Janice routinely helped Sister DePaul clean the sacristy, a room located off the altar that holds vestments and ecclesiastical vessels. Sometimes young Janice would go to the altar and make believe she was celebrating Mass: she would pantomime lifting the Eucharist and the wine; she would bless the congregation; she would sit in the priest’s chair. She believed there was a place for women on the altar.

Sevre-Duszynska’s call story suggests that her activism and desire for Catholic reform found its realization in contra legem ordination through RCWP. Now a priest, she celebrates sacraments, ministers to the marginalized, and offers a new model of priesthood through her peace activism. Her call story, combined with her ongoing activism, invites a reexamination—theologically, culturally,
biologically, and ecclesiologically—of what it means to be a faithful Catholic and what it looks like to stand in persona Christi. Sevре-Дuszynska and other womenpriests are paradoxically attempting to save their relationship with God and Roman Catholic tradition by breaking institutional rules and revisioning and reconstituting what it means to be a Roman Catholic priest. Telling call narratives becomes an act of performance that helps them rhetorically bridge the gap between their obedience and their disobedience.

An Alternative to Male Priests and a Chance at Healing

Long before her RCWP ordination, Marie Bouclin built a ministry around her experiences counseling women who had been abused by ordained Catholic men. Her growing expertise led her to write *Seeking Wholeness: Women Dealing with Abuse of Power in the Catholic Church.* Describing her call to ordination in RCWP’s collection of testimonies, *Women Find a Way*, Bouclin wrote, “Women who have suffered violence at the hands of a priest know full well that as long as there are no women standing ‘in loco Christi’ at the altar, all women are at risk of being raped and exploited and harassed with impunity.”

Bouclin had observed a common pattern for adult female victims: a priest (usually a pastor or spiritual director) would persuade a vulnerable woman (suffering perhaps from the death of a spouse, problems in her marriage, or a history of abusive intimate relationships) to begin a sexual relationship with him. The priest would tell this woman that he needed her, that he alone knew and loved her, that his vow of celibacy did not prohibit sexual relations, that her soul would benefit from being with him. When he later ended the relationship, she would be left emotionally and spiritually bereft, for a man she loved—who stood in the place of God as a conduit of grace—had used and abandoned her.

Women tend to blame themselves entirely for this form of clerical abuse, Bouclin wrote.

These women were taught to believe that priests do not lie. Priests are invested with Holy Orders; they are therefore holy men. These women were taught that priests speak for God and act in God’s name, and that only priests—always male—have been entrusted with the most sacred source of grace, the Eucharist. These women were taught that faith in God means unquestioning intellectual assent to unchallengeable beliefs, and that salvation hinges on obeying the teachings of the Church as transmitted by the priest.
In the wake of the Catholic sex-abuse crisis, in which over ten thousand victims alleged abuse by over four thousand priests in the United States alone, Bouclin’s observations resonate in the testimonies of women and children alike. Victims and their families echo Bouclin’s words: the priest is the closest thing on earth to God; he cannot do wrong, cannot be anything but trustworthy. The power differential heightens the potential for abuse. Because priests are dispensers of sacramental grace, a layperson’s relationship to a priest is inherently fraught on social and spiritual levels, impacting both body and soul.

Roman Catholicism has fallen under intense scrutiny since sex-abuse revelations emerged. All the more damning has been news of institutional obstruction that protected priests at the expense of civil justice and children’s safety. A Pew Research Center study revealed that 27 percent of former US Catholics who are now religiously unaffiliated left as a result of the sex-abuse scandals, while 21 percent of Catholics-turned-Protestant name the crisis for their decision. The abuse crisis has rendered church finances precarious, and devastating parish closures have become a common solution.

The vast majority of Catholic priests are not abusers, of course, but it is relevant to womenpriests like Bouclin that the face and the body of the Catholic sex-abuse crisis is a male priest. Abusive priests and the superiors who protected them were all men. When only men are ordained, abusive Catholic priests are all male. As a result of the crisis, many Catholics and non-Catholics no longer see priests, bishops, or even popes as gentle, pastoral patriarchs; instead, these men are more likely viewed as possible villains capable of anything from protecting pedophile priests to abusing children themselves. The bodies of men at the altar may never be perceived the same way again.

Bouclin has argued that male priests can reinforce female powerlessness or remind women of their abuser. Women cannot be priests; women must obey priests. As priests, men make decisions, stand in for Christ, and enact God’s will on earth. Without the possibility of ordination, women—like children—lack power and thus protection within the Catholic hierarchy. Like child victims of sexual abuse, laypersons develop “uncritical reverence” for ordained men. They cannot expect support from the institutional church because women who accuse priests of abuse are less likely to be believed—quite possibly because there are no women in the Roman hierarchy. Victims are ashamed and guilt-ridden, and the abuse cuts to the heart of one’s Catholic identity.

This also connects to the maleness of Jesus: Bouclin found that the person of Jesus Christ can be frightening for wounded women, and thus an exclusively male body at the Eucharistic table can prevent victims’ healing and
reconciliation.18 Which makes it all the more important, in Bouclin’s view, that women like herself seek ordination.

When she discerned a call to priesthood, Bouclin believed God wanted her to minister to vulnerable women who had been abused or exploited by ordained men.19 She asked herself, “Can I possibly model a different kind of priestly, Christlike presence?”20 In her mind, it is imperative that she can. Historically in Catholic law and teaching, women lack agency because their bodies bear the symbolic weight of feminized Catholic virtues.21 RCWP upends this formation because womenpriests take on the gestures, dress, and authority of priests. As womenpriests—notably, not as Catholic women—RCWP’s ordained women become symbols of both Christ and a reframed relationship between women and their church. Bouclin and other womenpriests see this symbol shift as a positive step toward rectifying the Catholic sex-abuse crisis, perpetuated overwhelmingly by ordained men.

Many womenpriests have come to understand their calls in light of the abuses and missteps of the institutional church. Their discernment processes often take into consideration the ways womenpriests can bring sacraments and healing to individuals previously harmed by Roman Catholic clergy. Bouclin described a woman who traveled a long distance to have Bouclin hear her confession.22 Womanpriest Eleonora Marinaro also described the conciliatory power of RCWP sacraments, saying, “Reconciliation with the Roman Catholic Church after years of estrangement is a prime feature of our ministry.”23 What male priests cannot offer, womenpriests can: they are an alternative embodiment of priesthood, proffering a chance for healing.

From Call to Discernment and Formation

As I was doing my research, once I recognized how much womenpriests wanted to talk about their calls to priesthood, I modified my interview questions to give them this opportunity. For most womenpriests, the call is their starting point. But what moves the women from inception to action? What besides God’s summons is motivating their call? What compels the women to proceed when Rome strictly forbids it?

When I asked womenpriests in interviews or surveys, “Why be ordained?” nearly every woman indicated she was honoring a call to priesthood. But I noticed other common responses as well. Some said they were resisting the all-male clergy. Others said social justice concerns compelled them and they wanted to work for equality in the Roman Catholic Church. Many wanted to be a role
model for women and girls, and many wanted to stand within a lineage of activist Christian women. Others reported specifically wanting to be role models for their daughters and granddaughters. Canadian womanpriest Monica Kilburn-Smith wrote, “I am also doing this for my daughters, and for the women in the world, to be a small part of helping women feel empowered and value their wholeness, their blessedness, as people of God, as beloveds of God.”

One anonymous respondent indicated that she became ordained for a myriad of reasons, but to her list she added, “I was asked to [seek ordination] by others. Clergy from other denominations and laypeople asked me. Then there was God hounding me in my dreams and in my prayer life. The hounding ended when I was accepted into the RCWP program.” Gabriella Velardi Ward also used the word bound in describing her call, saying she became ordained “to fulfill that to which God, the Hound of Heaven, has been calling me.” Both women evoked the nineteenth-century poem that describes God as a “Hound of Heaven” who pursues—or “hounds”—the souls that God most desires.

The pull of Catholic visual imagery and sacramental experiences also motivates womenpriests, who feel called to a kind of Catholic priesthood that resembles what they have watched, worked with, and prayed alongside throughout their lives as Catholics. Womenpriests live in twenty-first-century social and political contexts where religious identity is a choice: they could leave Roman Catholicism altogether for a different religion. And indeed, some have tried—but have come back to their Catholic roots. The womenpriests’ self-understanding is unequivocally Roman Catholic. They believe they should not have to abandon their faith tradition in order to live in a right and robust relationship with God and their Roman Catholic faith. “It’s my church. [It] does not belong to the hierarchy,” wrote Victoria Rue. Another woman explained, “Catholicism is my religious heritage; it is a vital part of who I am.” Monica Kilburn-Smith’s response was more legalistic: “Once you are baptized, the only way not to be Catholic is to deny one’s baptism, which I won’t do.” For Christine Fahrenbach, not just God but the Catholic tradition “calls me deeply. I believe the [Roman Catholic] church carries the mystery of [Christian tradition] authentically.”

Roman Catholic memory runs deep, as does the Catholic attraction to liturgical forms and sacramental gestures. This is the powerful pull of the Catholic imagination, indicating how the sacred should look, feel, and even smell. The womenpriests want to change priesthood and Roman Catholicism, but they do not want to let either go.

Indeed, imagery has inspired womenpriests to hear the call and imagine the possibilities within priesthood ministry. Ironically, much of this visual
inspiration has come from Episcopalian and Protestant women. Womenpriests report that the seemingly simple act of seeing a woman minister has inspired cradle Catholics who never imagined such a role to be possible for women. This is especially true of Episcopal services, as these most closely resemble Catholicism’s “high church” flavor. Juanita Cordero, ordained through RCWP in 2007, recalled a 2003 Episcopal liturgy in Chicago where she first saw a woman priest. The experience stirred her own call to priesthood. Not long after, she saw another Episcopalian woman priest presiding at Eucharist; she joined this woman’s community and started pursuing her own journey toward ordination.28

Younger Catholics report similar experiences. “Lauren,” a young woman in her early twenties who participated in local RCWP Masses and was discerning a call to ordination when we spoke, vividly described the first time she saw a woman priest. She was in El Salvador, attending a liturgy led by an Episcopalian woman: “The idea a woman could be a priest never even entered my consciousness until I saw...this woman celebrating this Mass very similar to a Catholic Mass....That led to this whole new series of questions, like ‘What role do women have in the church?’ and ‘How have women been excluded and oppressed?’” The experience, which she described as “beautiful,” left Lauren feeling “overwhelmed,” “shocked,” and “in awe.” Thereafter, she felt a “strong call” to study feminist theology.29 The visual of a woman at the altar, presiding over Communion, led Lauren and Cordero to discern a call to priesthood. The Episcopal example of what was possible enabled them to imagine Roman Catholic priesthood anew. Now, RCWP’s ordained women are doing the same for others, normalizing the image of an ordained, vested Catholic woman.

And yet most of RCWP’s womenpriests modify the image of a typical priest by shaking up the traditional ages and backgrounds for Roman Catholic candidates for ordination. The typical womanpriest is in her fifties, sixties, or seventies, is or has been married, has or had a career, and has been performing service work (or charity, volunteer, or social justice work) for decades. Honoring her call to priesthood and getting illegally ordained severs her relationship with the Roman Catholic Church. The quintessential seminarian, in contrast, is a high school– or college-aged male who commits himself to a diocese or religious order that subsequently funds all or part of his education, pastoral training, and living expenses. After what may be a decade or more of preparation, candidates take vows, first as deacons and later as priests. Ordination signals male Roman Catholic priests’ deepening obligation to and integration in the hierarchical church.

RCWP has no institutional oversight directing priesthood formation, no seminaries, and no requisite vows of obedience. No two womenpriests prepare
and train for ordained ministry in the same way: RCWP understands priesthood formation as stemming from a woman’s extensive personal and educational history. Instead of joining a Catholic seminary to train for priesthood, RCWP’s cooperatively designed formation program integrates a candidate’s educational and professional background with ordination-specific requirements.

RCWP’s program of preparation for ordination builds on candidates’ previous work and blends educational-degree seeking, distance learning, and hands-on training. Applicants submit recommendation letters, undergo criminal background checks and psychological evaluations, and sit for interviews. They present résumés, baptismal and confirmation certificates, and college transcripts. Some applicants have already completed the required theological work, whereas others augment their existing degrees once RCWP accepts them. Officially, applicants under age fifty-five need a master of divinity, master of theology, or equivalent; applicants over fifty-five need a bachelor of theology or equivalent. The program encourages applicants to complete a unit of clinical pastoral education. In addition, applicants complete writing- and activity-intensive program units, with each unit focusing on a different aspect of RCWP’s approach to ordained service. During this phase, which can take upward of a year, candidates write essays and homilies, design rituals and compose liturgies, and receive experiential training in sacraments. All steps are considered part of the discernment process, for ordination is not guaranteed—though nearly all of RCWP’s applicants have moved on to the deaconate and priesthood.

Without an RCWP seminary, candidates do not live and study together as male seminarians do. As a result, the women do not share foundations in personal experience, theology, religious studies, or pastoral studies, nor does RCWP instill in its ordinands a distinctively RCWP theology or ideology. This leads to challenges within the movement: for example, some womenpriests believe RCWP’s formation program should include more deliberate and rigorous feminist theological education. Several womenpriests expressed to me great frustration at their ordained colleagues’ lack of a foundation in feminist and intersectional thought. These women believe that RCWP can only lead twenty-first-century reforms if its womenpriests understand the ways gender and sexual orientation, as well as race, ethnicity, class, and ability, affect society’s marginalized people.

RCWP strives to show that the womenpriests are equipped for priesthood and ministerially capable. Without seminaries, womenpriests must be educated before entering the program. The movement then frames a woman’s past
education as laying a path to priesthood. The movement’s websites, RCWP-edited books like Women Find a Way, and press releases for upcoming ordinations list the women’s educational information and past service (most often to and for Catholic parishes, dioceses, and organizations), characterizing these details in a way that justifies the women’s claims to a ministerial priesthood. Critics who claim the women are ill-prepared for priesthood are confronted with biographical evidence suggesting otherwise. This is strategic: Inter Insigniores may deny that the women have a “genuine vocation” to priesthood, but the Vatican cannot deny the existence of educational degrees. Critics can reject the notion that God has called the women to priesthood, and skeptics can point out that the women have been ordained outside of the church and trained outside its seminaries, but the RCWP movement intends for the womenpriests’ professional histories to argue for their suitability for priesthood. And RCWP is thus far an education-focused movement, akin to Roman Catholic teaching orders like the Jesuits or Sisters of Loretto. RCWP requires its women to be educated, and the type of woman drawn to RCWP is well educated before joining the movement.33

RCWP’s women did not prepare for priesthood decades ago when they pursued educational degrees and started jobs and careers—given Rome’s firm no to ordained women, why would they have? But now, using websites, publications, press releases, and interviews, RCWP argues that its women have, in fact, spent years working toward honoring their call to priesthood. Rhetorically, these public displays engage and extend the discourse on true and legitimate priesthood and let RCWP argue that the model priest is experienced, educated, prepared, and well connected—even without Rome’s blessing. With its priestly lineup of mature, ministerial, and highly motivated women, RCWP invites audiences to reconsider what kind of person is called to ordination.

RCWP argues for the womenpriests’ legitimacy as priests by communicating their personal histories serving the Roman Catholic Church, as women religious, diocesan or parish employees, and lay ministers and volunteers.34 In spite of Rome’s rejection of their calling, womenpriests remained part of the institutional church for decades, often faithfully and dutifully carrying out consecrated service or lay ministries. RCWP’s women worked within the Roman Catholic system, but either in spite or because of this proximity, they felt they could not reach a full ministerial calling. Ultimately, a contra legem ordination became a welcome alternative to unordained service.
Womenpriests’ call narratives are an essential, performative starting point for understanding their *contra legem* actions. I want to highlight four characteristics of womenpriests’ self-disclosures around call. First, telling call narratives allows women to craft their own stories. Women like RCWP’s, who step into the limelight with illegal ordination, are readily constructed as either heroes or villains by the media, the Roman Catholic Church, critics, family, friends, and parishioners. Telling call narratives lets womenpriests take back control of their own stories and cast themselves in a positive light. Moreover, the deeply personal nature of call stories makes them difficult to dispute.

Second, call narratives give womenpriests tools to respond to Rome. The Roman church relies heavily on the language of “call” and “vocation” to describe its male-only priesthood and to argue that women are not and cannot be called to priesthood. In delivering deeply reflective call narratives of their own—and showing how the “Hound of Heaven” hounds them, too—womenpriests give themselves the “called” background that Rome reserves for men and, as such, attempt to negate Rome’s chastisement.

Third, call narratives allow womenpriests to talk about their relationship with God, their understanding of Jesus, and their communion with the Holy Spirit. Many conservative Catholic clerics dismiss womenpriests’ calls as inauthentic and “not of God.” In talking boldly about their vocational calls, then, womenpriests underscore their faith and spirituality, arguing that their illegal actions come from a place of sincere belief.

Fourth, and perhaps most important, call narratives suggest that womenpriests are obedient—to God’s voice, if not to Vatican mandates. In following a call, womenpriests are able to create themselves as passive receptors of God’s word and counter their critics’ accusation that they are activist agitators. Stories of calls help audiences see womenpriests as multidimensional, faithful, theologically reflective women who, in order to truly obey God, must disobey a patriarchal institutional that claims two thousand years of authority.