Womanpriest
Peterfeso, Jill

Published by Fordham University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/75860

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2629363
Chapter 3

Conflict and Creativity

RCWP has taken shape at a time when the Roman Catholic Church is struggling to retain its former prominence in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. The sex-abuse crisis has only exacerbated the issue. In a 2003 study, Peter Steinfels wrote, “American Catholicism, to put it bluntly, is in trouble. Absent an energetic response by Catholic leadership, a soft slide into a kind of nominal Catholicism is quite foreseeable.”1 RCWP has bought into rhetoric like Steinfels’s, seeing the Western church in a transitional place of crisis and calling out for dramatic change. To be sure, in some ways the data calls for a more measured read of Roman Catholicism: numbers remain more or less steady in the US (thanks largely to Latin American immigration), and membership is climbing in many places worldwide. Yet womenpriests, along with a myriad of Catholic progressive groups, see the Roman Catholic Church as failing to meet many faithful Catholics’ pastoral needs.

What are these important lapses in ministry? Womenpriests’ survey responses to this question circle around themes of unchecked power and oppression of laity. The Roman Catholic Church is failing to “[meet] people where they are [and allow] them to grow and become people of God.” Rome is “out of touch with reality.” The Roman church is not “relevant to our times” and will not be until it includes the “voice of non-ordained people in decision-making” and recognizes women and LGBTQ people “as equals within the church.”2 As one would assume, issues of gender feature prominently in womenpriests’ critiques of Rome, though perhaps Elsie McGrath put it most colorfully: the biggest problem in today’s Roman Catholic Church, she said, is “the 2,000-year-old subjugation of over half the world’s human population because of the hierarchy’s tunnel vision and morbid preoccupation with issues of genitalia.”3 Womenpriests see the Roman church declining in relevance and increasing in power abuses, and so they seek to change the church into what matters to Catholics like themselves.

The RCWP movement and womenpriests’ worship communities say that the “energetic response” Steinfels mentioned has already arrived, though it comes
not from church leadership but from illegally ordained womenpriests. Like other progressive Catholics in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the young RCWP movement often repeated the statistic that former Catholics were the United States’ second-largest religious group—behind Catholics. If “American Catholicism must be seen as entering a crucial window of opportunity,” as Steinfels stated, womenpriests are figuratively waving their hands in the air, calling upon others to see how they are seizing this opportunity and offering a distinct Catholic future.

Whereas the previous chapter contextualized RCWP’s activism and theological understanding with mixed messages from late-twentieth-century church statements and actions, this chapter examines RCWP’s creative responses to contemporary conflicts. I look at challenges that have shaped the RCWP movement and consider the ways RCWP relies on struggles within contemporary Catholic life—both structural and theological—to create itself as an alternative to the institutional church. In creating the Roman Catholic Church that womenpriests long for, RCWP reveals the conflicts within contemporary Western Roman Catholicism, specifically around demographic changes, reform strategies, decision-making structures, and the parameters of a Roman Catholic identity.

Roman Catholic Identity amid Demographic Shifts

Globally, the Roman Catholic Church remains the world’s single largest Christian body, with an estimated 1.15 billion adherents. The demographic and geographic makeup of these Catholics, however, is changing. According to a 2013 Pew study, in the past one hundred years alone, the percentage of Catholics in Europe relative to the global Catholic population has dropped from 65 percent to 25 percent, while Latin America has increased from 24 percent to 29 percent, Asia-Pacific has increased from 5 percent to 12 percent, and sub-Saharan Africa has increased from less than 1 percent to 16 percent. North America is more or less holding steady, growing from 5 percent to 8 percent. In the United States, Catholics of European descent are leaving the church in droves, and Catholics of Latin American descent are filling the vacancies. What is more, some surveys show a stunning decline in numbers of American Catholics: the 2014 Religious Landscape Study from Pew found 20.8 percent of Americans are Catholic, down from 23.9 in 2007. Put simply and somewhat cynically: Catholicism is on the decline among white, Western people, and some believe this to be a bad thing.

Why are Western, white, “Global North” Catholics cutting ties with the church? Some defections connect to disparities between the personal convictions
of many American Catholics and the Vatican’s long-held teachings on gender, sex, and sexuality. Studies affirm this gap: Rome opposes gay marriage, but 54 percent of US Catholics support it; Rome affirms clerical celibacy, but 61 percent of US Catholics believe priests should be able to marry; Rome does not allow divorce and remarriage, and many priests will deny the Eucharist to divorced or remarried Catholics, but 60 percent of US Catholics believe that divorced and divorced-and-remarried Catholics should be welcomed as full members of the faith; Rome refuses to consider the ordination of women, but 59 percent of US Catholics think women should be allowed to be priests. European Catholics align with American Catholics on several of these issues, but Catholics in places like Africa and the Philippines—also known as the “Global South,” a term that replaces the more pejorative “Third World”—adhere strictly to church teachings on these hot-button issues.

In short, the global church is a divided church, and issues that RCWP stands for—like women’s ordination, the end of clerical celibacy, and hospitality for gay couples—are not issues, per se, for all Catholics worldwide. And yet, for those Catholics who do focus on such topics, these can be the make-or-break reasons for staying Catholic or leaving the church. Particularly for progressive Catholics, the declining numbers in the Global North bolster their call to change the church—namely, by allowing more of the progressive changes favored by financially secure, white, educated Western Catholics.

Younger Catholics also struggle with the Roman church’s socially conservative elements. Writing about Roman Catholicism’s difficulty retaining Catholic millennials, Kaya Oakes cited a 2015 survey that found only 16 percent of American millennials identify as Catholic. Oakes concluded that “the more young Catholics start to embrace marriage equality, safe and legal abortion, access to contraception, and the liberal side on many other issues in the culture wars, the more of those same Catholics will also drift away from a church they perceive as incapable of change.” Younger generations of Catholics—Generation Z, millennials, and some Generation Xers—have not seen their church keeping pace with modernizing changes, and this has impacted their commitment to Roman Catholicism.

Enter RCWP, part of a much larger network of present-day reform movements seeking to revive the church in these challenging times. In her study of what she calls present-day Catholicism’s “underground church,” Kathleen Kautzer situates RCWP among this large family of post-Vatican II Catholic reform groups and worship communities that “favor full equality for women and gays and lesbians in the church, an end to mandatory celibacy, approval of most forms
of contraception, and a greater role for laity in decision making.” Kautzer’s wide swath of reform-driven subjects are, like most RCWP members, “highly educated, middle-class Catholics” who are “intent on creating an alternative model of church that exemplifies Vatican II’s open, receptive attitude toward the modern world.” RCWP fits within this family, sharing goals and often members with groups such as Women’s Ordination Conference (WOC) and Women’s Ordination Worldwide (WOW), Call to Action (CTA), Voice of the Faithful (VOTF), the Ecumenical Catholic Communion (ECC), FutureChurch, and CORPUS (a group of former priests calling for married and single male and female priests). RCWP’s women often partner with these organizations, and some womenpriests learned about RCWP through other reform groups.

In this way, RCWP stands on the shoulders of what came before and shares goals with many contemporaneous movements. Several of RCWP’s women have been members or leaders of WOC, WOW, and RAPPORT (formed in 1985, a group of women within WOC who wanted women’s ordination to be an immediate reality). When RCWP’s liturgies use gender-inclusive language, they replicate feminist-inspired choices that are happening and have happened in progressive-and reform-minded groups for decades. When RCWP’s women criticize male prelates for being obtuse or power-hungry, they join the chorus of organizations that locate Rome’s problems in the (all-male) hierarchy. When they propose allowing clergy to marry, they echo an idea voiced previously by other reform groups. Like other Catholic feminist reform organizations, RCWP seeks to retain an essential “Catholic-ness” amid a renewing spirit.

RCWP stands out in this cadre of reformers for its desire to address the Roman church’s contemporary problems by retaining the word Roman in its name and for illegally creating women clergy through the line of apostolic succession. There are, of course, other groups that support women’s ordination and even ordain women as priests: they call themselves “Catholic” and retain liturgy and sacraments. They are not in communion with Rome, either by choice or as a result of excommunication. One example is the Ecumenical Catholic Communion, which describes itself as “a community of communities which are ecumenical and catholic.” The small-c “catholic” here simply means “universal” and indicates separation from Rome. Additionally, the Catholic Diocese of One Spirit uses a “fully Catholic model of Christianity as practiced by the early Christians” and eschews creeds, dogmas, and any “institutionalizing” impulse. When these groups leave the word Roman behind, they signal that—unlike RCWP—they are willing to leave the Roman Catholic institution behind.
In spite of RCWP’s insistence on a *Roman* Catholic identity, scholars like Kathleen Kautzer and Julie Byrne have classified RCWP as or alongside “independent” Catholics — that is to say, not Roman. RCWP does closely resemble these groups: ordaining women, celebrating liturgy and Eucharist, combating Vatican decrees, placing new emphasis on lay involvement. Yet in keeping and emphasizing the “Roman” adjective in their name, RCWP signals its desire to be viewed differently from independent, catholic, and reform groups. As one womanpriest described in an email, “We have not walked away [from Rome] because *walking away from* the established Roman Catholic Church allows it to continue as the world’s dominating bastion of male influence, power, money, and misogyny. . . . We offer a new model of ordained ministry in a renewed Roman Catholic Church” (italics in original). She makes clear in her statement that, without the activism that aims to make women equal to men through priesthood, RCWP wouldn’t be the reform movement it purports to be.

This is one of RCWP’s recurring conflicts, both internal and external: the movement wants Rome to acknowledge its validity and emulate its egalitarianism, but it critiques Rome and distances itself from many Vatican habits and teachings. RCWP claims a Roman identity but admits—proudly, even—that it’s not part of the institution. When I inquired during interviews, “If the pope said, ‘You win; come join us!’ what would you do?” nearly all the women replied they would not join the Vatican without major reforms within the church. “You come join us!” many women said. In other words, the women do not see themselves auditioning for a job as a “real priest” if and when the ban on women’s ordination ever changes; instead, they see themselves as modeling and living out an entirely new priesthood, a whole new way of being priests. They believe the Roman church needs dramatic change, and they believe they are embodying that change.

RCWP views itself as remaining connected to Rome and offering a model church structure that can fix contemporary problems and honor Christ’s vision for the church. What remains uncertain is whether RCWP’s ordained believe that positive changes can happen within institutional structures or believe that the root of Roman Catholicism’s patriarchal problems lie in institutional power. In RCWP’s collective mind, can women as priests alleviate power abuses, or would women replicate them?
“Roman” and “Roaming” Catholics: Womenpriests in the Eyes of Their Communities

Amid this context of contemporary Catholic history, American Catholic demographic shifts, and Catholic feminist reform movements, womenpriests serve worship communities that embrace the idea of ordained Catholic women. Womenpriests’ communities view womenpriests as offering a Catholic style and tone that meet their own spiritual and religious aims. The following information on RCWP’s community members comes from my electronic survey of RCWP and ARCWP community members and ethnographic data from two academic theses (one undergraduate, one master’s) focused on specific RCWP communities (Therese of Divine Peace in St. Louis, Missouri, and Sophia Inclusive Catholic Community in Sussex County, New Jersey).

The majority of RCWP’s community members tend to resemble the womenpriests themselves: older, well educated, white, and female. Perhaps the best conclusion to draw here is the simplest one: just as women’s ordination activists have been arguing for decades, people want priests who look like them.\textsuperscript{19}

RCWP’s parishioners overwhelmingly identify as Catholic.\textsuperscript{20} By “parishioners” I mean the individuals who regularly attend RCWP Masses and make up the womenpriests’ worship communities. Surveys revealed parishioners to be religiously invested and engaged people: many reported attending other churches in addition to the womanpriest-led ones, including Lutheran, United Church of Christ (UCC), Mennonite, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and (in Vancouver, British Columbia) Anglican churches. Faith mixing is not unusual—a 2009 Pew Research Center poll on religion and public life found that just over one-third of all Americans attend religious services at more than one place, and nearly one-quarter of all Americans attend services that are not in their own faith tradition\textsuperscript{21}—but the practice is slightly less common among Catholics, so its prominence among RCWP communities is noteworthy.

Because so many of RCWP’s parishioners embrace theological variability, many attend both RCWP services and Roman Catholic services. Why not choose just one? For starters, many love being part of a large parish where they have decades-long histories, longtime friends, responsibilities, and a familiar community, often in a local neighborhood. They love the music and perhaps participate in the choir. These characteristics of the parish experience are not readily available in RCWP’s small communities.

Some worshippers supplement RCWP liturgies with other services because few womenpriests offer weekly Masses and none offer a daily Mass. Some do
not wish to abandon their parishes because they believe their home pastors and communities are welcoming and liberal, and they find spiritual sustenance there. These RCWP community members do not see a disconnect—theologically, doctrinally, or socially—between their presence at RCWP Masses and their presence at “valid and licit” Roman Catholic parishes. A cradle Catholic in Ohio said simply, “I believe in the validity of both.” Only a few respondents worried that worshipping with RCWP could jeopardize their relationship with their (arch)diocesan parishes.

A notable percentage of RCWP parishioners, however, feel that they cannot in good conscience attend both, and RCWP provides these individuals what the institutional church will not: a sense of belonging in a Catholic faith community. Consider this statement from “Rachel,” a twenty-two-year-old queer woman who attended Therese of Divine Peace: “I really wanted to go to church. I just didn’t want to go to church and feel like a pariah. I really value being Catholic. I really value the Mass, and I don’t think I can practice my faith by myself, though I’ve tried. And so I feel like [Therese is] a community that I feel good being a part of, and I don’t feel like I have to be someone different than
who I am.” Rachel was not alone in pointing to this truism for RCWP communities: belonging is key. Therese attendee Katie joked, “I call [Therese] St. Squarepegs. . . . It’s like the Land of Misfit Toys. It’s a bunch of people, just for whatever reason, they didn’t fit in somewhere and everyone was brought here.”25 One person wrote of Sophia Inclusive Catholic Community, “I feel much more comfortable at Sophia because it’s a lot of people who think the same as I do,” while another said, at Sophia, “I can come together with people that think and feel like me, and it gives me a jolt to go through the next six days.”26 ARCWP priest Dorothy Shugrue expressed a familiar sentiment when she told me she wished Rome would recognize and “support that many [Roman Catholics] are returning to the faith because of us.”27 RCWP appeals to disillusioned Roman Catholics because it provides connection within a spiritually familiar package while letting participants feel that they belong.

Womenpriests are not simply bait for disillusioned Catholics. Parishioners value RCWP worship communities because they offer inclusivity, open table Communion (i.e., non-Catholics are welcome to share the Eucharist), spiritual empowerment, and a community of like-minded individuals. It is true that the provocative, illegal ordination of a woman to the priesthood initially draws curious observers, but it is the form of liturgy, the shared sacramental authority, the community, and the theological underpinnings that make worshippers stay. In parishioners’ eyes, RCWP and its womenpriests symbolize the changing, accepting, progressive church that they have long awaited. Many community members said that their RCWP community—and not the institutional church—brings Jesus’s message to a twenty-first-century world.

As excommunicated womenpriests, RCWP can position themselves as part of the solution while decidedly not part of the problem. Community members make a similar move: they take the Catholic history, tradition, and sacramental beauty that fuel them spiritually and jettison the elements they find toxic, unjust, or antiquated. I must be very clear: it is highly significant that parishioners view RCWP as a suitable alternative to the Roman Catholic status quo. This acceptance suggests that RCWP is Catholic enough—in the eyes of parishioners—to be authentic. They do not think they have left Catholicism; they believe they have moved on to its better, fuller, truer expression. They are still Catholic, but on social and theological terms to which they can readily acquiesce. Even better for these Catholics pained by contemporary church problems is the fact that RCWP is not one with Rome. To modify a popular Christian expression: these worshippers see themselves as in the church but not of the church. Instead of looking to the Roman church for guidance, they believe the Roman church
should look to them: they are practicing the ideal, viable Roman Catholicism for
the twenty-first century and beyond.

In this newfound Catholic space where womenpriests remake Roman Cathol-
icism, parishioners make new discoveries: about priesthood, Roman Catho-
icism, the sacraments, and Jesus. Women see their priests as peers and not as
“an elite separate role.”28 Their womenpriests are role models who “demonstrate
what servant leadership is.”29 Many now appreciate Roman Catholicism more
deeply and intimately because they feel engaged with liturgy, tradition, and sac-
raments in ways they never had before. A woman in Kentucky has found a new,
feminine image for the Eucharist: “a mother carrying a child in her womb [with]
the umbilical cord from mom to baby . . . feeding the child.”30 Several described
how sacraments are more deeply, profoundly experienced, both individually and
within community. One respondent in Orinda, California, delighted in how
“we share equally in consecrating the host at communion [and] use inclusive
language in all the sacraments. There is a freedom to be with my God/myself. It
is refreshing to know I am not alone in my theology and thinking.”31 A parish-
ioner from St. Louis said that participating in Eucharist at Therese of Divine
Peace helped her see that “while the priest is the presider, we are all celebrants of
the sacraments.”32 Having a woman in the role of priest also offers new images
and ideas for Jesus. “He is our brother, not our Lord,” one respondent succinctly
stated.33 Another elaborated: “I’m thinking even more of [the] feminine image
of Jesus. Just being in service with womenpriests and women deacons and peo-
ple supporting them gives me a deeper sense of Scriptures and parent and child
and the love between them being the Spirit. I experience Jesus as sister as well as
brother and mother.”34

Taken together, the comments reveal how RCWP community members are
finding new ways to understand themselves as spiritual beings and Roman Cath-
olics. Furthermore, they see womenpriests as mapmakers for this journey. A cra-
dle Catholic from Ohio praised her womanpriest, who “has facilitated a couple
of book discussions and [led] some profound discussions on Who Jesus was and
our concept of God. I think it has helped me form a faith that’s more realistic,
that takes into account modern science and generally makes more sense to me. It
also challenges me in new ways to be more aware of the Divine Presence within
myself and others, as well as our connectedness to all creation.”35

As community members tell it, the RCWP experience offers space to ex-
plore untested theological ideas. Sometimes these ideas include open defiance
of Rome. One Sophia Inclusive Catholic Community member reported, “We
don’t belong to the Roman Catholic Church R-O-M-A-N. This group belongs
to the roaming R-O-A-M-I-N-G. . . . Everybody is searching, you know? A respondent from Covington, Kentucky, demonstrated some rebelliousness when she wrote, “I feel excited and energized to go to the womanpriest masses. It feels like we are saying to the CHURCH You can’t stop us! So just get out of the way here we come.” These emerging religious identities are not about doctrinal certainty or rote answers to Christianity’s big questions. Searching together, in community, with one foot planted safely in their notion of “Roman Catholic” and another foot stretching to the spiritual unknown, RCWP offers parishioners room for experimentation.

Although womenpriests and parishioners share demographic data, regional identities, and love for Roman Catholicism, as well as serious reservations about Rome as an institution, the two groups have important differences. First, unlike womenpriests, most (though not all) community members fly under the radar of disciplinarian prelates and can choose to be simultaneously members of licit Roman Catholic parishes and illicit RCWP communities. Second, and more important, womenpriests have followed their vocational calls to the point of excommunication. They are public figures whose *contra legem* actions are publicly known. While RCWP community members enjoy involvement in readings, shared homilies, concelebration, and home Masses, they do not aspire to sacramental priesthood. They do not feel called to leadership, to sacramental facilitation, to starting new worship communities. Priesthood is not their vocation.

The distinction underscores the crucial vocational dimensions of RCWP priesthood. My interviews, surveys, and primary-source readings revealed that RCWP is not merely a club for people disillusioned with the Roman church, created by women angry at the Roman church. Womenpriests show a discrete way of being Roman Catholic in the twenty-first century: they do not join other Protestant or non–Roman Catholic communities but instead build from their Roman Catholic foundation. RCWP aims to practice the “discipleship of equals” ideal and as such break down the lay-clergy divide while answering a call that leads to an ordained state that differentiates them from laity. Theirs is a “both/and” approach that works for their parishioners, who feel both shepherded by a role-model priest and included fully in their community’s operations, both practical and sacramental. Though RCWP’s numbers remain relatively small, survey responses suggest that womenpriests provide parishioners with a much-desired spiritual path. For some, this is a path they did not even know they wanted, paved with theological ideas they did not even know existed.
Organizational Questions and Conflicts

As RCWP settles into its second decade, a major concern for the group involves organization. RCWP aims to avoid the power structures that it criticizes in the institutional church. Specifically, and following the conclusions of many Catholic progressives, many womenpriests decry clericalism and hierarchy as synonymous with abuses of power. They see church bishops as out of touch with the laity and structurally emboldened to remain aloof, yet influential. All womenpriests hold some criticisms of the hierarchical bureaucracy, but RCWP is divided over the best way to rectify these challenges—within both RCWP and a reimagined Roman Catholic Church.

RCWP can be seen as analogous to early Christian communities in the first and second centuries—and, not surprisingly, this is a comparison the movement embraces. Like those intentional, worshipful communities in the wake of Jesus’s death, RCWP is a faith-based, grassroots organization. Like RCWP, early Christ-following groups were small and intimate, and the men and women gathered for worship shared authority. Women had a voice and position in many of these communities owing to their cultural role within the home. As early Christian groups evolved, there emerged a (perceived) need to organize and formalize. Leadership roles became more prescribed; titles like deacon, presbyter, and bishop gained authoritative weight; and men stepped into the positions of power. Like the early Christians, RCWP found it necessary to develop more formal administrative structures than were first envisioned following the 2002 Danube ordination. As it grew, RCWP organized into geographic divisions (West, Midwest, Great Waters, South, and East Regions in the United States; West and East Regions in Canada), largely for practical reasons: women wanting to gather for meetings or retreats did not have ample resources to travel across the country or cross international borders, and the regions wanted to remain small enough to hear one another’s voices and personally guide ordinands in their preparation programs.

While RCWP’s current organization structure is largely pragmatic, the American movement’s 2010 divide into RCWP-USA and the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests (ARCWP) arose from disagreements about governance. Specifically, RCWP’s South Region separated from RCWP and later formed ARCWP. As a researcher, I found it incredibly difficult to get information about the RCWP-ARCWP split. The women involved were reluctant to divulge specifics or speak ill of one another. Many concluded that disagreements are bound to arise out of a group of strong-willed women who have spent decades
struggling against injustice—a conclusion I tend to agree with but find too simplistic. I finally got a sense of the conflict when one of the womenpriests shared with me a series of emails from 2010, leading up to the RCWP-ARCWP split.

At its core, the 2010 split was over dissenting opinions on how to avoid abusive power structures within RCWP. Generally speaking, womenpriests believe Catholic clerics often wield power dangerously but do not agree on ways ordained women might avoid replicating those problems. Much of the 2010 conflict was specific to the United States because it concerned questions about tax exemption and nonprofit status.

Several factors exacerbated the dispute. First, that most of the exchanges occurred over email worsened the disagreements. One gets the sense that face-to-face meetings would have led to, if not a different outcome, a more amicable split. But in-person meetings were and remain challenging for unpaid womenpriests, who might have to travel hundreds or thousands of miles to conference with other ordained women. Thus, womenpriests found themselves with principled differences of opinion and no easy way to connect in person and communicate in a straightforward fashion.

Second, some members felt railroaded. These parties believed themselves a minority who could not convince the majority. Those holding a minority view had become distrustful that RCWP’s Leadership Council (LC) could truly represent all perspectives. They called for a consensus model for decision-making, having come to view RCWP’s democratic system cynically. In contrast, other members felt stymied. They trusted the LC’s efforts to hear and accommodate all voices, and so they interpreted the minority as obstructionist. Frustration abounded and anger escalated.

Third, nonprofit status was an issue for the organization. In 2005, when the name “Roman Catholic Womenpriests” became formalized, some lawyer friends of the ordained women helped RCWP become a nonprofit corporation that could receive donations. Lawyers recommended that RCWP set up a limited liability company to better collect and manage money the organization collected. None of this impacted Canadian womenpriests, who fell under different laws, so RCWP-USA split from the Canadian groups solely for the purpose of gaining legal nonprofit status, not because of any ideological dispute. Unexpectedly, the nonprofit status and the way it was set up—long before many of RCWP’s womenpriests were candidates or ordinands—aggravated the problems in the United States. As was required of LLCs and nonprofit organizations, RCWP put bylaws in place. But some of RCWP’s women questioned whether these bylaws should
be modified to be in more in line with documents outlining RCWP’s ministerial aims and structures.

In other words, RCWP’s need to become a nonprofit, within an American system that has certain legal and definitional requirements of nonprofits, led to heated debates about RCWP’s mission, vision, and leadership. The very idea of “corporate” influences within RCWP—even if they served the purpose of soliciting donations—riled some women who felt called to a nonhierarchical church. Other womenpriests were more amenable to the changes, trusting that RCWP could and would avoid hierarchical power abuses in spite of increasingly formalized structures. Those who had an urgent need to address discrepancies felt silenced; those who had different priorities felt the other side was creating unnecessary conflict.

As a result of irreconcilable differences, in October 2010, RCWP’s South Region decided to, in their words, “regionalize effective immediately.” They likened their newly imagined relationship with RCWP-USA as being akin to Canada’s and Europe’s: “one with you yet on a parallel but unique road.” They wanted to continue participating in nationwide meetings and retreats; they would also form their own 501(c)(3)—that is, a tax-exempt charitable organization—and develop their own decision-making processes. The now-independent South Region came to form ARCWP.

What differentiates RCWP and ARCWP? At the national level, RCWP-USA is guided by a board of directors. RCWP-USA aspires to make decisions based on consensus, but its constitution allows for a democratic majority vote when consensus cannot be reached. In comparison, ARCWP has an operating structure with no boards or administrators, and its constitution emphasizes “circular leadership” and a vision “to live as a community of equals in decision making.” ARCWP is not organized by regions and includes members from across the United States, Canada, and South America.

What do womenpriests say are the differences? A few patterns emerged in the 2014 survey I conducted. First, several ARCWP women used words like “collaborative,” “egalitarian,” and “circle leadership” to highlight what they view as important about ARCWP’s governing structure. ARCWP’s Diane Dougherty disliked that RCWP uses “decision-making boards” and championed ARCWP’s efforts “for full participation” and for “finding ways to . . . be accountable to each other.” Dougherty saw board-driven leadership as a structure given to problems of “hierarchical malfeasance.”

Second, womenpriests focused on the speed of and preparation for ordination—namely, as RCWP womanpriest Ruth Broeski put it, that ARCWP
“ordains women more readily and in greater numbers relative to geography than RCWP.” One of RCWP’s women wrote that “the process for preparing for ordination within ARCWP seems to take much less time.” ARCWP bishop Bridget Mary Meehan framed this particular difference positively: “We also are flexible about our preparation program and allow equivalences by providing custom design certificates to prepare candidates and provide ongoing education for our ordained members.” Tied to what Meehan called “flexibility” was the observation from both groups’ women that ARCWP makes “more exceptions to the rules” or, phrased slightly differently, is “less attached to rules and regulations.”

I must note, though, that a number of respondents minimized any differences. Some women said they choose not to focus on differences; others said there were no important differences to report. Others understood differences—between ARCWP and RCWP and among all the RCWP regions worldwide—as a necessary part of growth. While some thought the division unfortunate, others framed it as understandable, even favorable. Womanpriest Gabriella Velardi Ward explained, “This movement allows for cultural differences and different ways of being [a] church.” Womanpriest Victoria Marie of Canada West wrote, “I think we are all striving for the same thing but we have not set out to be a monolithic organization, it’s more like a federation that can accommodate different regional needs.”

Clearly, the international RCWP movement strives to make room for differences of opinion. Variations exist, as do different branches and regions with similar but distinctive practices and tones. By forgoing a strong institutional core, RCWP gives up the power of exclusivity that characterizes the Roman Catholic hierarchy. But this does not mean that womenpriests do not worry about becoming hierarchical. My research has shown that womenpriests constantly try to keep themselves in check; they know they cannot complete their mission of reforming a troubled church if they replicate the very problems they denounce.

This struggle between organization and opposition to hierarchy continues to dog RCWP’s heels. Is there a way for reform movements based in and seeking to reform an institutional model to truly practice a “discipleship of equals”? Will womenpriests find a way to lead their communities and organize themselves on national and international levels without linking this leadership and organization to power and authority? And how can RCWP avoid the problematic mixed messages that characterized the late-twentieth-century Roman Catholic Church, even to the point of inspiring resistance movements like RCWP? RCWP is the test case for these questions. The ideal model may not yet exist, and to succeed, the movement may have to do something creative.
Protestantism and the Pull of a Catholic Identity

A familiar refrain in criticisms of RCWP is that it has crossed the line between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Some critics suggest, often snidely, that if the women really want the power and prestige of ordination, plenty of Protestant groups will take them. Much vitriol plays out online anonymously, as shown in this sampling of comments on a YouTube video from an RCWP ordination in Chicago:

*Response #1*
As a catholic woman I totally disagree with woman priests. However, if I felt like you, I would leave the catholic church and join one of the thousands of protestant churches that allow women ministers! What’s wrong?? are these churches not good enough for you?? Leave the catholic church_ to those that believe in it!!!

*Response #2*

*Response #3*
stop trying to_ ruin the true Church.

*Response #4*
Women priests!!?lol What next..male nuns?? LOL. Heretics . . . thanks Vatican_ 2! You all opened up the floodgates for heretics such as these so called womenpriests to run absolutely rampant! Anyway. They aren’t accepted by the rock of st peter the popeand holy mother church..so lol you are never allowed to go to confession or any of the sacraments as they are al..EXCOMMUNICATED . . . THEY BROUGHT IT UPON THEMSELVES!

*Response #5*
This is the most BLASPHEMOUS video I’ve seen to date concerning the Catholic church . . . we should pray for these poor lost unfortunate souls, and the souls that they deceive. 47

These criticisms show how RCWP finds itself amid conflicting ideas of what Catholicism is and requires. The discourse of Protestantization removes womenpriests and their followers from the soteriological surety of the One True
Church. Additionally, this kind of labeling insults RCWP as well as Protestants, who get looped in with excommunicated women as removed from the graces of Roman Catholicism.

These are familiar moves in denominational boundary making. Christianity has a long history of establishing and enforcing religious categories as a way of carving out diverse Christian identities. This grouping separates members of the same religious affiliation by political affiliation, obedience to authority, and eternal destination. It is all too easy to define dissenting Christian groups—“heretics”—out of existence; Christians have been doing it for two thousand years.

Womenpriests are resolutely Catholic. Being Catholic is a tightly held, constitutive identity for womenpriests; to remove themselves from Catholicism would be disingenuous and a betrayal of conscience. Glossing over the ways womenpriests claim a Roman Catholic identity robs us as scholars of the chance to parse the many varieties of twenty-first-century Catholicism. As author and women’s ordination activist Angela Bonavoglia quipped in response to the suggestion that Roman Catholicism would become something altogether different if women were priests, “I hardly think the hallmark of Roman Catholicism is discrimination against women!”

For womenpriests, sacraments are the hallmark of Roman Catholicism, and their attachment to sacramental priesthood distinguishes womenpriests from Protestants. Womanpriest Mary Grace Crowley-Koch echoed other womenpriests when she merged call, community, and sacrament:

I feel like I am now doing what I was called to do many years ago. I feel validated and affirmed by the people of God in my inner core. One of my greatest experiences was to celebrate a wedding with my husband (a married [Roman Catholic] priest), an Episcopal priest, and myself. A great balance and I knew in my heart and being this is what the Spirit wants for the [Roman Catholic] church.

Womenpriests consistently name the sacraments as their primary reason for keeping a Catholic identity, even when other Protestant denominations would allow them to pursue ordained ministry.

Many of RCWP’s ordained women tried to leave Catholicism for Protestantism but returned. Their online biographies and conversations with me attested to these patterns. Womanpriest Mary Kay Kusner’s website biography testified to her own discernment, saying that many of her colleagues in Boston College’s master of public ministry program left the Roman Catholic Church to get ordained. She told me more about this in our interview. Her husband left the
church because of the sex-abuse scandal, and so she tried to become an Episcopalian. Yet she realized that she did not “know how to be other than a Catholic.” She sometimes wished that she could “switch to another tradition”—but she could not do so authentically. She felt she was “putting on a costume or mask” when she experimented with the Episcopal Church. Catholicism was the only religious tradition that worked for her. She found in her relationship with the Episcopalians a dual confirmation of identity: one, she was truly called to ordained ministry; and two, she was a Catholic only and could not be anything else. She said of her decision to stay Roman Catholic, “I want my presence to speak louder than my absence.”

Womanpriest Beverly Bingle had a similar story. While in seminary, three non-Catholic traditions asked her to be ordained with them. “The impact of being asked was that it became very very clear to me that I could not be anything but Catholic.” The Danube Seven’s Dagmar Celeste credited two Methodist women to “opening her eyes” to the call when they invited her—an unordained Catholic woman—to be their pastor. Denominational differences did not stop the women from selecting Celeste as their minister or seeing her ministerial potential. Womanpriest Kathy Vandenberg admitted to a Lutheran minister that, if she could do anything, she would be ordained. In turn, he encouraged her, saying she reminded him of Lutheran women called to ministry. Womanpriest Diane Dougherty wrote, “Almost everyone that recognizes my gifts and calls me forth to exercise and practice my priestly role are Christians from other traditions—ex-Catholics, non practicing Christians [and] non-Christians.” A womanpriest who did not recognize her call until she was sixty years old said, “[An] Episcopal priest called me a priest before I had recognized my calling.” Womanpriest Ann Penick, a convert to Catholicism, received discernment help from non-Catholic family members: her stepdaughter, who is a United Church of Christ minister, and her Jewish cousins affirmed her call and her plans for contra legem ordination.

In spite of these personal explanations, critics find it easy to dismiss womenpriests as a disagreeable and contemptuous “other”—or as Protestant. This language of forced conversion, whereby critics unmake womenpriests as Catholics and remake them as Protestants, denies the women the right to name their own religious identity and disparages their intent to change their church. When used in this way, the myopic “Protestant” label condescends to a female-led movement that very deliberately uses “Roman Catholic” in its very title.

Instead, I suggest we look at the manner in which RCWP raises pressing questions about “real” Catholicism. Facets of RCWP may not seem Roman
Catholic, but undoubtedly Roman Catholics around the world understand their faith tradition and religious identity very differently. Moreover, women-priests argue passionately that their actions, their motivations, and their entire self-understanding are strongly and powerfully Catholic. Just as Catholic feminist women in the 1960s and 70s declared, “We are feminists BECAUSE we are catholic,” women-priests are saying with their actions, “We are priests because we are Catholic.”

What they are not saying is, “We are priests because the institution says so”—and yet for some women-priests, the Roman Catholic Church’s pull is too great. Take the story of former woman-priest Norma Jean Coon, a wife, a mother, and the first (and so far only) RCWP woman to renounce her ordination. Made a deacon through RCWP in 2007, Coon renounced her ordination and her affiliation with RCWP and publicly sought full reconciliation with the Roman church on February 8, 2011. She created a website (deactivated shortly thereafter) on which she announced, “I wish to renounce an alleged ordination and publicly state that I did not act as a deacon as a part of this group except on two occasions, when I read the Gospel once at Mass and distributed Communion once at this same Mass.” She went on to seek formal reinstatement and vowed obedience to Roman church teachings: “I confess the authority of the Holy Father on these issues of ordination and recognize that Christ founded the ordination only for men.” She separated herself from RCWP, writing, “Formally, I relinquish all connection to the program of Roman Catholic Womenpriests and I disclaim the alleged ordination publicly with apologies to those whose lives I have offended or scandalized by my actions.”

RCWP let Coon go quietly. Administrator and woman-priest Suzanne Thiel announced that Coon was no longer a member and no longer affiliated with RCWP. The group knows that contra legem ordination and latae sententiae excommunication are not for the faint of heart: illegally ordained women risk losing family, friends, and their faith community. Coon wanted reconciliation with the institutional church; leaving RCWP was the sole way this could happen.

Coon’s story underscores the seriousness of RCWP’s attempt to relocate Roman Catholicism out of institutional Catholicism. Coon’s personal struggles around family and health propelled her to seek reinstatement with the Roman church. In the face of grave pressure and uncertainty, she felt the institutional church’s lingering pull and returned to the Catholic fold. In so doing, Coon affirmed for herself Rome’s authority to make rules for her salvation.
Coon’s struggle reveals yet another conflict for the young RCWP movement: convincing others (and sometimes, as in Coon’s case, womenpriests themselves) that people can be fully Roman Catholic while criticizing the institutional church they seek to reform. Womenpriests must further acknowledge their excommunications in order to argue—counter to Roman Catholic teaching—that one can stand outside the institutional church and find eternal life, because “real” Catholicism, as the movement understands it, has to do with sacraments, ministry, certain elements of church history, and following one’s conscience. In RCWP’s ministerial hands, Catholicism is not synonymous with Rome’s institutional power.

And yet, because the movement thwarts institutional mandates, RCWP is readily condemned by certain critics as “Protestant.” Many critics refuse to engage the reimagined relationship between Catholicism and the Vatican that RCWP has embarked on, instead painting womenpriests with the broad brush of Protestantism, reserved for Catholic renegades since the sixteenth century. Is RCWP “going Protestant” as it “goes rogue,” or—as the group would argue—is RCWP opening eyes and doors to new ways of being Catholic?

**Conclusion**

RCWP’s members have taken the Vatican messages that resonate with them most and brought them to bear on current challenges in the Western European and North American church. They believe that obedience to essential Roman Catholic issues (as they understand them) demands disobedience to certain authoritative decrees. Womenpriests look at the contemporary Catholic context—the declining numbers of self-identified Catholics in the Global North, the decades-old drop in vocations, the difficulty many Catholics face in receiving sacraments, and the toxic sex-abuse crisis—and believe ordained women can help change a struggling church for the better. They see themselves as truly, authentically Roman Catholic, obedient to the faith if not to the patriarchy, and able to help guide the church and its disillusioned members through twenty-first-century challenges.

But a problem remains for RCWP. A hallmark of Roman Catholicism is its highly structured, nondemocratic centralization. In spite of the theological and doctrinal ammunition the church gives RCWP, Rome offers RCWP no model for egalitarian decision-making. If womenpriests’ fear of replicating clerical structures is at the heart of their movement, they need to discover new forms of
priestly leadership. At some point, therefore, RCWP may have to relinquish its claims to the “Roman” adjective, considering the movement aspires to organizational structures the church does not follow. Or, not unlike the early Christians, RCWP may discover that hierarchical rigidity is necessary for strength and unity. If, somehow, RCWP finds a creative structural solution that incorporates movement-wide unity and rebukes hierarchy, the group may force us to reconsider what makes Catholicism “Roman” after all.