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Choreographing the Dance of Dissent: Roman Catholic Womenpriests' Claims to Authority

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Abstract: In June 2002, seven Roman Catholic women were ordained to the priesthood by two bishops on a boat floating on the Danube River in the presence of hundreds of spectators. Their ordinations broke with two millennia of Catholic tradition prohibiting women priests and started a global movement. Post-ordination, the women priests were excommunicated by the Vatican, yet they still identify as Catholic priests. We explored the central tension of being insiders/outside by examining womenpriests' claims to authority. The thematic analysis of interviews with over one hundred womenpriests and bishops led us to note an emerging theme in their language regarding claims to authority. In this analysis, we asked: how do womenpriests claim authority in ways that differentiate them from Roman Catholic Church authority as well as in ways that clearly position them within the tradition? We found four main strategies by which they make these claims: reclaiming the history and tradition of the early church; claiming the role of the magisterium; embodying authority; and community-based sources of power and authority. We concluded that the womenpriests are engaged in a delicate choreography of the dance of dissent, positioning themselves as the change some people may want to see in Catholicism while remaining true to Catholic roots and rituals.

Keywords: Roman; Catholic; womanpriest; RCWP; authority; mediation; presence

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1. Introduction

In June 2002, seven Roman Catholic women received the sacrament of Holy Orders, ordaining them to the priesthood, on a boat floating on the Danube River in the presence of hundreds of spectators. These women, known as the Danube Seven, are the founding mothers of the Roman Catholic Womenpriest (RCWP) movement, an organization spanning 34 US states, Canada, Mexico, Western Europe, South and Central America, Philippines, Taiwan, and South Africa. Their ordinations publicly broke with two millennia of Catholic tradition and authority by defying Canon Law 1024, which states that “only a baptized male can validly receive holy orders” (*Catechism*), a law that they declare is unjust in its prohibition against ordaining women. Currently, their website lists about 225 womenpriests and bishops, many of whom serve local communities in house churches of 6–12 members, and some of whom serve larger communities of up to 100 or so members. The size of these communities, as well as the frequency of gathering, is not readily available information and local inquiry is the usual point of access. In the United States, about 23 states list active communities led by a womanpriest.

The womenpriests¹ claim Roman Catholicism as the root of their ordained, priestly ministries. As priests and bishops, they practice their ministries in local, independent communities that are inclusive and aspire toward a “discipleship of equals” (Schussler Fiorenza 1993). Central to their claim to priesthood is their acknowledgement that Catholics generally support the ordination of women; thus, their calls to ordination arise from the *sensus fidelium*, the voices of the faithful (D'Antonio and Dillon 2013, p. 98). In receiving ordination, the womenpriests are responding to the call of some faithful Catholics to develop and minister within inclusive communities.

After the ordination in 2002, the Danube Seven were excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church (hereafter referred to as RCC or the Church); those bishops and priests who participated in the ordinations also received writs of excommunication. The RCC is the institutional, authoritative, hierarchical structure of Roman Catholicism, headquartered in the Vatican, that has since excommunicated all participants in women's ordinations and declared those ordinations to be illicit and invalid (Allen 2008). Under the FAQ portion of their website, the Roman Catholic Womenpriests (RCWP) published a response to the 2008 decree of excommunication: We "reject the penalty of excommunication issued by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith on 29 May 2008, stating that the "women priests and the bishops who ordain them would be excommunicated *latae sententiae*". Roman Catholic Womenpriests are loyal members of the church who stand in the prophetic tradition of holy obedience to the Spirit's call to change an unjust law that discriminates against women".

The Vatican considers the ordinations illicit in their defiance of canon law and invalid because the "material"—women—cannot receive the sacrament. That is, canon law decrees that being female prevents them from receiving ordination; by law, only baptized males can receive it. In declaring these ordinations invalid, the church intends to convey that the ordinations of women have no effect other than to violate canon law (Zagano 2011, p. 134). The womenpriests claim their ordinations are valid and licit because a validly ordained Catholic male bishop who is in apostolic succession within the Roman Catholic Church performed the rite; they reject the Church's declaration of females as "wrong material" and claim the full reception of ordination. While the womenpriests acknowledge that they have defied church law, they believe it is the only just response to an unjust law.

It is important to note that the womenpriests' acceptance of the notion of apostolic succession, the Roman Catholic Church's practice of tracing priestly lineage back to the Twelve Apostles in the Christian gospel texts. Accepting apostolic succession ties womenpriests to aspects of the established doctrine within the Catholic Church, while their ordinations and ministries clearly plant them in communities outside the church. Straddling insider and outsider status is a delicate balancing act that can be challenging to choreograph. Here, we explore this central tension of inside/outside by examining womenpriests' claim to authority.

The womenpriests locate their authority within the context of the Catholic tradition they claim to follow as well as defy, while also establishing separate sources of authority that differentiate their movement as a legitimate alternative to institutional Catholicism. In studying how womenpriests imbue themselves with the authority to follow the central features of Roman Catholicism and break away from others, we focus on the traditional models of Catholic authority that the women critique and employ, and on the inter-related themes of agency, embodiment, ritual, and presence. We highlight the ways women, in claiming authority as priests and bishops, embody change through ministry, the development and modification of ritual and the interpretation of scripture, and access to/mediation of divine presence, which is often a central feature of religious practice and belief.

We focus on authority in this paper to highlight how the womenpriests position themselves relative to the institutional church in terms of teaching, liturgy, and interpretation. This approach offers a good lens into the ways in which they are willing to challenge and accept the doctrines of the institutional church. Claims to authority also help us highlight how womenpriests use power differently and similarly to RC male priests. By examining authority on the margins, we hope to open spaces of productive inquiry. Womenpriests occupy the margins relative to the institutional center of Catholicism and yet claim to have authority from within doctrine and scripture, while being both insiders and outsiders.

1.1. Theoretical Background and Theories of Authority

The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) claims three sources of authority: the magisterium, or teaching body of the RCC, which is made up of the Pope and bishops; the canonical scripture; and the apostolic tradition.² These three strands are intertwined like a braid; they

are difficult to separate, and they are mutually reinforcing. The magisterium teaches that all three strands of authority originate in Jesus Christ, who passed his role as mediator between God and the people on to the apostles. The RC hierarchy's authority relies heavily upon its claim to apostolic succession, which holds that after Jesus passed authority on to the apostles, they laid hands upon their successors and thus passed divine authority on to the following generations.

Exercising its authority in the matter of ordination, the hierarchy also bases its arguments against ordaining women on three points: scripture, which offers no evidence that Jesus ordained women or called them to be apostles; the constant tradition of church practice, which they argue contains no evidence of women in ministerial roles; and the iconic or representational argument based on scriptural accounts of the final Passover supper with Jesus, in which he instructed those present to "do this in memory of me". The magisterium, over the past 700 years, and more recently in official documents such as [Inter Insigniores](#) (1976) and [Ordinatio Sacerdotalis](#) (1994), has interpreted these instructions to mean that the celebrant of the Eucharistic meal, must be a physical stand-in for Jesus the male of first century history. A female cannot perform that role as the congregation would not be able to see in her a natural resemblance to Jesus as male; only a male can represent Jesus in that way ([Butler 2007](#); [Dillon 2018](#); [Zagano 2011](#); [Helman 2012](#); [Halter 2004](#); [Wjingaards 2001](#)). Proponents of women's ordination, including the womenpriests, contend that Jesus did not ordain anyone, male or female, as there was no ordained priestly ministry in his time; scholars have documented a number of ministerial roles, such as deaconesses and priests, in the early to medieval church, and the iconic argument of representing Jesus' maleness in the Eucharist reifies "naturally visible gender differences" to the exclusion of other social or spiritual attributes ([Dillon 1999](#), p. 62; [Dillon 2018](#); [Madigan and Osiek 2005](#); [Zagano 2011](#)).

As McBrien notes, authority is only one of many functions of the Holy Spirit; others include prophets, teachers, preachers, and presbyters—roles Jesus exemplified in his ministry and which he showered upon the church (and eventually on to the magisterium). Apostolic tradition is largely, though not solely, derived from canonical scripture and selected early church writings and practices, which the magisterium is able to define and interpret as a result of being ordained in the direct lineage of the Twelve Apostles. Thus, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (*Catechism*) teaches that the "magisterium exercises authority it holds from Christ to the fullest extent when it defines dogmas" ([Catechism 1997](#), Paragraph 88). Authority from Jesus passed down through the apostles grants authority to the magisterium to select and interpret scripture, declare dogma, and receive revelation for the entire church.

This hierarchical view of authority is somewhat balanced when the *Catechism* makes room for the community of the faithful in the shaping of church teaching. Paragraph 91 notes that all the faithful "have received the anointing of the Holy Spirit who instructs them and guides them into all truth". This recognition leads to the declaration of the *sensus fidei*, or the sense of the faithful, the "whole people", which the *Catechism* states cannot "err in matters of belief" ([Catechism 1997](#), Paragraph 92). The faithful are "those who, inasmuch as they have been incorporated in Christ through Baptism, have been constituted as the people of God; for this reason, since they have become sharers in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and royal office in their own manner, they are called to exercise the mission which God has entrusted to the church to fulfill in the world" ([Catechism 1997](#), Paragraph 871). In short, the authority of the Catholic Church comes from the top down and up from the grassroots through the deliberative community: ordination descending via apostolic succession confers gifts of the Holy Spirit for teaching and interpretation upon the hierarchy, while baptism confers the gifts of the priest, prophet, and bearer of Christ's own office upon all in the community.

This sense of bidirectional authority is evident from writings about early church practices regarding the selection of those called to ordained ministry, practices which could be seen as part of the Church's tradition. In the middle of the third century, Church father Cyprian wrote that he made no decisions without consulting priests and deacons and without the support of the people (see [Cyprian 1964](#), Letters 14:4). In that era, the whole

church community participated in selecting bishops and ministers, and the laity were welcomed as collaborators in decision making (McBrien 1994, p. 745; Baggett 2008, p. 52; Dillon 1999, p. 51). The Second Vatican Council made it clear that the Holy Spirit, as a basis for authority, is granted to the whole church community as the people of God, not simply those in charge; thus, authority resides in the deliberative community living, working, and worshipping together (Baggett 2008, p. 18; Dillon 1999, p. 48). Thus, Vatican II documents such as *Lumen Gentium* re-established broader roles for laypeople within their communities, as had been the tradition in the early Church (D’Antonio and Dillon 2013, p. 13).

The Roman Catholic Womenpriests see authority similarly to the view expressed by Cyprian and Vatican II, as embedded in and exercised by priests and community together (Baggett 2008). As priests, they rest their claims to authority on apostolic succession, and therefore offer their interpretations of scripture and the sacraments, define the role of priests and bishops in the movement, and facilitate the governing power of the community. Their website prominently states that their ordinations:

Are valid because of our apostolic succession within the Roman Catholic Church. The principal consecrating Roman Catholic male bishops who ordained our first women bishops are bishops with apostolic succession with the Roman Catholic Church . . . [A]ll qualified candidates who are presented to our bishops for ordination are ordained by the laying on of hands in apostolic succession in the Roman Catholic Church. (Ordinations | [Roman Catholic Women Priests](#) n.d. current webpage)

Further, their mission is to “prepare, ordain in Apostolic Succession, and support primarily women who are called by the Holy Spirit and their communities to a renewed priestly ministry rooted in justice and faithfulness to the Gospel”. These statements suggest that the womenpriests are maintaining the model of authority claimed by the institutional RCC while ordaining women to create change. In this paper, we aim to examine the claims to authority made by the womenpriests by discussing their ordinations and ministries to clarify the ways they are challenging as well as reinscribing traditional RCC authority structures.

1.2. Women’s Agency and Religious Authority

Broader social and religious theories on presence, ritual, and embodiment also shed light on how womenpriests assert their authority. The complicated role of womenpriests straddling the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the Catholic Church, and the authority that they claim to do so, is brought into relief by Robert Orsi and Matthew Engelke’s theories of presence. In his book, *A History of Presence*, Orsi takes a large-scale approach and says that “the word ‘presence’ may refer, in one context, for instance, to the sense of a greater-than-human power in the awesomeness of nature and, in another, to the presence of a saint in his or her image or a chip of bone” (Orsi 2016, pp. 8–9). We use presence more in the former sense of transcendence, similar to Engelke’s use in his book, *A Problem of Presence*. In Engelke’s work, “presence” refers to the presence of God. Engelke asks: “How is God present? This is a central Christian question, to which the answer is Christ. . . . Christ is the definitive presence; what comes after him is only ever a mediated one” (Engelke 2007, p. 13). We discuss presence to indicate divine presence, that is, the spirit of God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit, and experiences of that spirit in group gatherings, mass, the Eucharist, or other RCC and RCWP activities.

Orsi writes: “This is the Church’s problem with the real presence [of God]: controlling access to it. Such control is one of the surest grounds of ecclesiastical and political power, not only over the laity but over the rulers of nations, too” (Orsi 2016, p. 2). Womenpriests, who envision a movement that opens access to this presence for all, still struggle with maintaining authority around access to presence in their movement. In ordaining women as priests and bishops, the RCWP value their roles as mediators and gatekeepers of divine presence yet strive to abolish the gatekeeping that excludes women from the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

Social movements and groups also use presence as a method of ascribing and obtaining authority. Engelke states: “Simply put, the problem of presence is how a religious subject defines and claims to construct a relationship with the divine through the investment of authority and meaning in certain words, actions, and objects” (Engelke 2007, p. 9). The idea of presence is one lens we use to examine how the womenpriests differentiate themselves from teachings and practice in the Catholic church while establishing their authority with respect to mediating, offering, and sharing divine presence, in ways that people on the margins of Catholicism as well as the church hierarchy will recognize. The ability to offer divine presence, or to mediate it, is an indicator of one’s claim to religious authority in Catholicism and is typically acknowledged only after ordination.

Catherine Bell’s book, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, explores ideas of ritual practice and embodiment that highlight how authority is used in the RCWP, in which the women break away from established canon law while choosing to stay within certain requirements.³ Bell argues that ritualization is a process that “enhances domination by operating on the human body and structuring the movements of the body” (Smith 1992, p. 421). Bell also argues that “ritual activity is not the instrument of more basic purposes such as power, politics, or social control which exist before or outside of the rite’ but rather that ‘ritual activities are themselves the very production and negotiation of power relations” (Smith 1992, p. 421). In the Catholic context, women are socialized to embody certain values, as Jill Peterfeso points out in her book *Womanpriest: Tradition and Transgression in the Contemporary Roman Catholic Church*. By acting as priests, women exercise authority, which is largely out of bounds for women as Catholics. They establish themselves as priests and authority figures to those in their community and to themselves. Priests as women particularly come into play when considering the roles of the ordained as representatives and mediators of divine presence. Peterfeso says that one woman “explained to me—in a twist on Marshall McLuhan’s oft-cited phrase—“Your body is the medium, and the medium is the message” (Peterfeso 2020, p. 148). The medium of women’s bodies as priests conveys the message that women can be mediators between the worldly and the divine. In the RCC teachings, ordained males not only mediate divine presence as priests but represent the person of Christ in the ritual sacrifice of the mass; they act *in persona Christi*, a role that only a male can fulfill. Traditional male priests convey the message that only males can represent the divine, while womenpriests convey the disruptive message that they, too, can represent and mediate God’s presence.

1.3. Previous Scholarship on RCWP: Adherence and Dissent

Previous scholars have explicated the RCWP’s combination of adherence and dissent to arrive at diverse conclusions. Maya Mayblin, in particular, examines the RCWP’s “capacity of dissent that strives for *difference but not rupture* from the ‘one true’ Roman Catholic Church” (Mayblin 2019, p. 134; emphasis in original) as well as the RCC’s “contradiction in modern Catholicism that women can be God-like but not priest-like” (Mayblin 2017, p. 139). Mayblin quotes theologian Eric Doyle, saying Jesus’ “maleness is not formally relevant to his mediatorship” (Mayblin 2017, p. 146). Doyle’s statement is in stark contrast to the teachings of the RCC that claim the maleness of Jesus is central to his life and mission and forms the foundation for Canon Law 1024. The authority to mediate as Roman Catholic priests who are women is a theme we explore more deeply to analyze the tensions cited by Mayblin.

In “Women Priests: Radical Change or More of the Same?” Helena Moon points out the many challenges the RCWP faces in trying to change the RCC while maintaining their connection with that institution. She critiques the way the RCWP holds onto ideas, such as apostolic succession, that are essential to the RCC maintaining patriarchy, which, she says, “is formed by hierarchy and centuries of patriarchy, and the ordination ritual ceremony . . . becomes representative of the exact oppression that I thought womenpriests were trying to eradicate” (Moon 2008, p. 124). In her article, “Weeping and Woo-Woo: Observing Independent Catholicism in America”, Julie Bryne demonstrates that other

scholars, including Marian Ronan, share Moon's concerns. Bryne writes that Ronan worries about the RCWP's "enormous emphasis" on apostolic succession "as a sign of legitimacy" (Bryne 2016, p. 33). However, Bryne takes a different approach, arguing that womenpriests are not copying the RCC hierarchy, but developing their own forms of authority that are more community-based. Bryne argues that apostolic succession is essential to a group outside of the RCC maintaining their Catholic identity, in the eyes of both the RCC and other independent Catholic groups: "Apostolic succession in particular serves as a sort of "gateway" tradition authorizing other traditions. As such, it is a focus for "other Catholics", who often feel pressure to prove their authority and authenticity" (Bryne 2016, p. 33). Claire Maria Chambers, in her article "'I name Myself in Power'": The Roman Catholic Womenpriests and the Performance of Relational Authority", also finds the use of authority in the RCWP less hierarchical than in the RCC, arguing that it is community-based and relational, and that it is "the discovery of its own power in the wake of community discernment, rather than a demand for obedience" (Chambers 2017, p. 40). In these ways, the womenpriests work to establish ministries and communities that are inspired by Vatican II thinking, emphasizing the equal participative roles of the congregation in determining the directions and work of the communities, rather than being priest-centered and dependent (McDannell 2011). The womenpriests are not unlike the Evangelical Lutheran women clergy in Finland, as reported by Kati Niemelä (2011). The ordained Lutheran women priests take more liberal positions on Church issues, such as same-sex marriages, in contrast to male priests and Church policy; these women tend to use their priestly authority in community-based, relational ways that distinguish them from male priests and the institution.

We point to similar tensions as previous scholars and follow up on these inquiries by analyzing how authority is tied to the RCC and how it is distinct from it, and how that authority is related to agency, the body, and mediation in the RCWP. We also analyze this data in the broader scheme of women's religious movements, asking if the RCWP is "more of the same" in its relationship not only to the RCC, but to other feminist religious groups as well.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Questions

This paper presents an analysis based on a larger narrative project on the journeys of the Roman Catholic Womenpriests. Considering the exclusion of women from ordination, the larger project aimed to understand how these women understand their vocations, their journeys to ordination, and their ministries as priests in an institution that prohibits the ordination of women. As we analyzed the narratives, we observed patterns in the language that the womenpriests used to claim their authority as ordained Catholic priests. For this analysis, we asked: How do the womenpriests claim their authority in ways that differentiate them from Roman Catholic Church teachings? In what ways do their claims to authority clearly position them within the tradition of the institution they seek to change?

2.2. Context of Study

This project began in the spring of 2010, with the San Jose ordination and consecration of Olivia Doko as bishop of the western region in the USA. We attended that liturgy and the following reception, and we were clearly the only "non-RCWP" people in attendance at the reception. It was fascinating to observe the energy and dedication of the women and their supporters, mostly family, to creating communities of worship, calling forth women as candidates for ordination and building a social movement to challenge the Roman Catholic Church. After that event, we began to develop this project as a narrative exploration of women's journeys as they sought to change a 2000-year-old patriarchal religious institution.

2.3. Methods and Data

It took 18 months to convince the leaders in this movement to allow us to interview the members. At first, they allowed us access to one region's members at a time. For two

years, we traveled across the USA to all the regions, including the regions of the Association of Roman Catholic Womenpriests (ARCWP), and to Europe, to interview more than one hundred women priests and bishops. These narrative interviews lasted an average of three and a half hours each and were comprised of open-ended questions designed to elicit the narratives of the women's journeys, before ordination, during formation, and post-ordination. Each interview was audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. The women quoted in this paper gave permission for their names to be used. We analyzed the texts thematically, using the NVivo software for qualitative data analysis.

The data collection produced a prodigious amount of data, about 8000 pages of transcripts plus personal notes recorded in two full notebooks. We analyzed the varied ways participants discussed their claims to authority in the narrative interviews, which was a small, focused portion of the total set of interviews.

3. Results

We found four main themes in our results:

- A. Roots, reclaiming history, and the tradition of the early church; Jesus Christ gives me authority.
- B. Proto magisterium, the authority to interpret and teach (and exclude).
- C. The embodiment of authority.
- D. Community as source of power/authority.

3.1. Authority through Roots and Jesus Christ

The RCC claims it “does not have the authority” to ordain women to the priesthood based on scripture and tradition and cite Jesus' choice of men as apostles, thus assuming the absence of a tradition in the early church of ordaining women. Roman Catholic womenpriests claim their roots in the early church to justify their ordination. Bishop Bridget Mary Meehan declared: “So you know, we're really reclaiming the tradition. It was lost. It's that radical. It's very traditional in the sense of rooted in Christ and the early church history”. The womenpriests locate their authority to ordain and be priests in the origins of the Christian church and, in this way, issue a corrective to the RCC while validating their authority to interpret scripture and tradition.

Maureen underscored her authority to interpret church history and tradition when she shared: “I keep going back to the ancestors. Mary Magdalene is my ancestor; she had a relationship with Jesus”. The womenpriest movement broadens the base of scripture and tradition to include that which has been invisible throughout much of Christianity's history and claims Mary Magdalene not only as an ancestor, but as the First Apostle, clearly placing women in the apostolic tradition from the start.

In recognizing Mary Magdalene as the first apostle, the womenpriests are building on a long-standing tradition of the RCC, going back to Thomas Aquinas and most recently recognized by a formal decree from Pope Francis, who called Mary Magdalene the apostle of the apostles (10 June 2016). Recognizing her status as an apostle does not equate to ordination or, apparently, equal status with the twelve male apostles, who also were not ordained. Rather, her status as first apostle recognizes that she was the first to whom the risen Christ appeared and he “sent” her to tell the eleven; to be an apostle is to be “sent”, to be an emissary.

As Carlyn noted, “I'm walking a new path in a path of tradition”. Like the RCC, the womenpriests claim that they have authority to act as priests based on their understanding of Christ. However, their understanding conflicts with the traditional teachings of the RCC. Members of the womenpriest movement claim authority from Christ through Mary Magdalene as an apostle to define, expand, and interpret the roots of the early church and to place themselves within that tradition.

Womenpriests claim the authority to interpret as priests and bishops that is denied to them in the RCC, thus making room for themselves by connecting to Church roots and tradition. Interpretation in the RCC is usually considered the province of the magisterium,

the bishops, and the Pope, who are considered the teachers of scripture and Church tradition. Over two millennia, this has come to include a rather selective circle of mostly ordained men defining and interpreting canonical scripture, defining themselves as the sole interpreters, and setting down canon law which cements their role as the Church's only teachers. Under John Paul II, the Church declared the conversation on women's ordination to be definitively closed, as its leaders did "not have the authority to ordain women to the priesthood". Yet, as one womanpriest, Patti, challenged, scripture records Jesus assuring the disciples that "all authority has been given unto you".

Womenpriests clearly understand their role as interpreters, as well as challengers, of scripture and tradition, breaking into this closed circle. Patti declared, "Yeah, we're breaking the rule. We're breaking Canon 1024 that says only a baptized male can be ordained. It's an administrative rule. It is not God's law. And that is very hard for people to understand, that Canon Law is not God's law". In one fell swoop, Patti breaks through the canonical circle of ordained men, claiming that women can be ordained, can be teachers, and can develop and define law for the church. Based on their claims to Christ as the origin of their authority, the womenpriests differentiate between God's law and human law, challenging the conflation of the two that is often present in Church teachings. In doing so, the womenpriests open the door to interpretation that enables them to take on their role as magisterium.

3.2. *Authority through Magisterium: Open Gatekeeping*

The womenpriests emphasize their inclusivity while maintaining the requirements regarding eligibility for ordination, emphasizing the authority of that role and the RCWP's connection to the RCC.

The boundaries that define who can preside at the table in the RCWP are taken from the institutional Roman Catholic model. Women seeking ordination must complete a program that can take months,⁴ and are now required to have a master's in divinity, theology, or religion/religious studies. Patricia Fresen, one of the first bishops in the movement, emphasized the challenge of opening doors while still maintaining a fence: "But whether you are single or married or gay or lesbian or divorced, none of that is a problem if we can discern within you a genuine call to priesthood, or if you want to be part of our community". Fresen separates the RCWP from the RCC by emphasizing the people the RCWP includes; however, she also demonstrates how the RCWP maintains their authority and connection to the RCC—both organizations have people who control access to priesthood by defining and discerning in others a "genuine call to priesthood". For the RCC, women can never have a genuine call to the priesthood (or, if they do, the RCC has not been given the authority to ordain them.) RCWP members emphasize their difference from the RCC. In the RCWP, anyone can claim that they have been called to the priesthood. However, priesthood membership is still carefully vetted, and access to priesthood is not solely determined by an individual's desire to become a priest.

Eileen DiFranco, a womanpriest in Pennsylvania, further emphasizes the tension between inclusivity in RCWP and the maintenance of priesthood authority. She states that, unlike the RCC, "We [RCWP] don't deny anyone God". She contrasts the RCWP to the Roman Catholic Church in terms of the access each group provides to God—the RCWP provides that access to anyone who wants it, but the Church denies people access to God through excommunication or refusal to give communion. Eileen's quote also implies that both organizations could give or deny access to God. It is not that the RCWP cannot deny access to God, but rather that they choose not to deny this access. Thus, the RCWP maintains authority while emphasizing inclusivity, whereas the RCC maintains authority while exercising exclusivity. The women have access to God in a way that parallels that of the male priests in the Catholic Church, making their community powerful, important, and still Catholic. It is what they do with that access that distinguishes them from the Church.

The model of inclusivity Eileen presented is common among the womenpriests. Bishop Regina explains that what Jesus "revealed and practiced . . . is part of my priesthood, too,

the total inclusivity of all around the table. This inclusive table community is probably my image of priesthood". Again, inclusivity is essential to the way Regina practices her priesthood. However, in maintaining that priesthood, a hierarchy is still present; there is still a table at which one presides and an organization that determines who has the authority to preside, preach, or teach.

The womenpriests also question the institutional interpretation of the sacrament of baptism; a popular slogan they have used publicly is "if you baptize us, you have to ordain us". Bishop Andrea asks,

Do we have one class of baptism or several? If baptism is the door to [ordained] service in the church, then it should be equally the door to all people, and it shouldn't be defined by the power holders to eliminate the possibility of voices other than clones of themselves from the halls of decision-making.

If all receive the sacrament of baptism, all should be eligible to receive ordination, as called forth by the community. The struggle to remain Roman Catholic while being radically inclusive means that inclusion into the priesthood requires some gatekeeping to maintain the importance of priesthood, thus limiting the boundless inclusion for which some RCWP members are striving.

3.3. *Authority in Embodiment*

One of the central practices of priestly ministry is the celebration of the Eucharist. While seeing womenpriests perform this ministry is healing for many who participate, the RCWP facilitates this healing by placing women in authoritative positions that replicate and challenge aspects of the Catholic hierarchy they critique.

Typically, on weekends, the community of faith gathers to celebrate their common life and heritage in the ritual of the Mass. In the RCC teachings, the celebration of the Eucharist centers the sacrifice of Jesus' death as atonement for sin, yet it is based on the Passover meal which remembers and celebrates the Israelites' passage from slavery to freedom. Bridget Mary departs from atonement theology to place the emphasis on a loving God:

[W]hen you demystify it into what is supposed to be a celebration of a sacred meal rooted in the Passover and that all are invited to participate in sharing that to the fullest extent possible, now that is really returning it to its sacred roots ... They [RCC] have taken it and tried to put the celebration of a sacred meal into this awful theology of God is the ogre that made his son suffer from the sins of the world versus Christ as a liberating voice opening up the face of God as generous, compassionate, loving, forgiving, and healing, and that we're in this kind of embrace.

Bridget Mary is asserting her priesthood, as well as her teaching role as a bishop and member of the magisterium, when she reinterprets the Eucharist as accessible and welcoming to all, rejecting the emphasis on sin and atonement. She understands the latter emphasis to be restrictive and controlling, while the interpretation she offers opens spaces of liberation and empowerment.

A critical aspect of the RCWP Eucharistic ministry is that women are the presiding and authoritative figures; after two millennia, having women embody priesthood in the Mass is a monumental paradigm shift for many people in womanpriest-led communities. Bridget Mary observed:

I think what we've been able to do is to return the Eucharist to a celebration of the community so that people feel that in their bones. Women often cry when they first experience a womanpriest-led Eucharist and I think it's because they experience that women 'are worthy' to do this in the sense that, because of their baptism, everyone is worthy. But they're so disenfranchised by the institution; it's like giving them back what is rightfully theirs.

In sharing her observation, Bridget Mary acts as a teacher and interpreter within her role as bishop and promulgates a restorative and inclusive vision of church as a community

and institution that recognizes, utilizes, and celebrates the dignity and worth of all members equally.

Yet this inclusivity also highlights the tensions central to the movement. It is powerful and empowering just to see a woman take a place of power and to embody the mediation between Jesus and the community. However, this is also a meditation imbued with power, power that the RCWP is trying to diffuse. In her ministry within the ARCWP, Bridget Mary aspires to share power “with the people taking their equal responsibility and equal gifted roles in this circular model versus the institution doing this kind of “we own the sacraments’ and ‘we are the gatekeepers to God”. Thus, in their role as magisterium, the womenpriests and bishops take seriously their obligations to interpret the sacraments with and for their communities and, in doing so, challenge the hegemonic institutional interpretations and practices of the RCC. Notably, while Bridget Mary emphasizes community empowerment in her services, she still describes it as a “womanpriest-led Eucharist”. That is, the priest is still the leader of the community and that does establish and reinforce hierarchy. Interestingly, while leadership and members value community involvement, many congregants find it healing to experience women in leadership roles within a familiar priest-led structure.

3.4. Authority through Community

Community empowerment is also central to the womenpriest movement as a whole; the value of community is more explicitly framed by the Association of Roman Catholic Womenpriests⁵, a sister organization to the RCWP that calls “qualified women and men to serve the people of God as priests in a community of equals”. Bishop Patricia noted this when she reflected that “our biggest difference also is that you learn—slowly, but you learn—to not come in as you are the priest, therefore you are the boss, and everybody is there to sort of do what you say. You work with the community in an inclusive way, and give them a say, and things for the community are decided by the community, not by the priest”. This interpretation and practice of community life is part of the tradition of the early church, as noted above by Cyprian’s letter including the people’s voices in decision making, a tradition that seems to have diminished over time. As priests and bishops, women embodying these roles in community have re-centered the community as the heart of the church, away from dependence on the hierarchy toward empowerment to build community together. Patricia’s comment above also suggests that while the RCWP are trying to have priests work collaboratively with communities, it is something of a balancing act between the priests as “boss” who can “give them a say” versus the community as the ultimate decision makers. Bishop Andrea noted that “we must hold onto the community being the strength of our way of life”.

One of the ways the community is re-centered is in calling forth vocations to the priesthood, a requirement for moving toward ordination. In one community, the congregants chose to recognize the gifts of a woman, Nancy Corran, who had offered a communion service (similar to Mass, without consecration). Rod, a former RCC priest who joined the womanpriest movement and worked within the community, shared that “at the end of that service, some of the people said, ‘This is ridiculous. We’re ordaining you, [Nancy].’ And that is what happened. The full canonical rite, but they took the role of the bishop. They’re the church, they ordained Nancy”. The community felt empowered to exercise *sensus fidei*, the sense of the community of faith who recognized Nancy’s gifts and called her forth to ordination, and then to pastor the congregation.

The RCC teaches that priestly ordination confers the ability to “call down” the Holy Spirit to effect transubstantiation of the bread and the wine. This practice centers the priest as “in persona Christi”—that is, embodying or representing Christ to the community—enacting the atonement for the community, which becomes the passive recipient. In contrast, most womenpriests emphasized community empowerment in sharing the words of consecrating the bread and wine in the celebration of the Mass. Bishop Regina noted that she “strongly believes when we say the words of the consecration together, that is

the community event". Victoria re-centered the community in the consecration by letting people know:

We're going to just leave the bread and the wine right there and we're all going to be gathered around and it's because what happens here is not with the bread and the wine, it's not because of the magic of the priest, because it's the community, right.

However, this is not the view of all womenpriests. Some, like Juanita Cordero, emphasize the role of the priest in accessing presence. She describes her role as a priest in Mass by saying:

I can hold the body and blood of Christ in my hands and give that to others. And people say oh it's not magic it's not power. Something happens to allow me to do that. I know Christ is present there in a different way than is present in you and me or present in flowers or present in the color here. He's present in a different way and I'm able to give it.

Like many other womenpriests, Marellen finds Juanita's interpretation gives far too much emphasis to the priest's control over presence. Echoing a common Protestant critique of Catholicism, most womenpriests emphasize the pervasive nature of God's presence, rather than their ability to control that presence; Marellen commented, as "if we hadn't been there [in God's presence] before". In the Eucharist, the womenpriests reject the RCC's conception of control over divine presence and focus on the community as a witness to and expression of that presence. This implies a radical shift that means the womenpriests stand on a more equal footing within their communities and center the community as the active, consecrating, transubstantiating subject of the celebration, recognizing that all are "*in persona Christi*". In doing so, the womenpriests and participants embody hierarchy and disrupt it.

4. Discussion

The womenpriests' narratives suggest that they position their authority as "both-and"—within the bounds of the RCC institutional authority, and outside of those boundaries to model and challenge for change. The narrative excerpts presented earlier illustrate their choreography of dissent. While they claim for themselves the "three-legged stool" of authority in the RCC—scripture, apostolic succession, and tradition as practiced across the history of the church—they also claim the authority to reinterpret scripture and tradition as well as continue in the line of apostolic succession. In doing so, they position themselves outside of the RCC's authority by receiving ordination, presiding over rituals as priests and bishops, administering sacraments, reinterpreting scripture and rituals, and leading congregations. In their ministries, then, the womenpriests are effectively altering the daily practices and teachings of Roman Catholicism. Thus, their dance of dissent in the margins of Roman Catholicism is also a dance of belonging: they are creating and legitimating the validity of their vocations, agendas, and agency within Catholicism. They are using the tools of Catholicism to build different ways of being and doing church. One way this is observed is through the womenpriests' presiding over rituals, such as the Mass, in ways that are more inclusive in language and practice.

The control of divine presence is central to the RCC across history and is one of the main roles of ordained clergy. The womenpriests claim authority to mediate presence as priests, which poses challenges to the RCC's teachings and authority. The womenpriests understand this aspect of their role as ordained clergy and have embodied the role of mediators of divine presence in celebrating the Mass and consecrating bread and wine in the ritual reenactment of Jesus' death and resurrection. Because they are women and Catholic priests, this ritual act underscores their claims to authority and situates them outside (as women) and inside (as priests) the boundaries of the institutional RCC. That community members who identify as Catholics find womenpriest-led Masses legitimate, supportive, and inspiring chips away at the RCC's claim of the male clergy's sole control over mediating presence. Although the communities are small, the inclusive access to

divine presence and the authority of the womenpriests to offer the mediation of presence within a recognizably Catholic ritual can be seen as a challenge to Roman Catholicism.

The challenge is not one of numbers; rather, it is significant that the womenpriests develop small, intentional communities and that they attract people who identify with stepping outside the bounds of traditional Catholicism while keeping the rituals recognizable. These communities are not drawing away critical numbers in RCC parishes and may be attracting those who had stopped attending a RCC rather than those who are actively engaged in a Catholic parish. Congregational size needs to be placed in context. The membership in the RCC has dropped dramatically in the last few decades and many dioceses are financially insecure (Gambino 2019; Saad 2018). Smaller numbers in the womenpriest communities may simply reflect an overall movement away from denominational religion, rather than a lack of ability to challenge the RCC by drawing membership away from traditional parishes.

The womenpriests offer a recognizably Catholic space for gathering community and sharing rituals, which allows people to feel comfortable with the familiar, a way to exit from the parts of Catholicism one rejects—such as a male-only clergy, hierarchy, or the control of presence—and a kind of bridge toward a new model of priesthood and community (Baggett 2008; D’Antonio and Dillon 2013). For adults who identify as Catholic and wish to maintain that identity, the option of a womanpriest-led community can be something of a life raft. The women as priests see themselves as Catholic and offer that in ministry, and the community members call them to do so; both seem to want the freedom to be Catholic as they define it (D’Antonio and Dillon 2013). It is in the desire for and the practice of freedom that they most depart from the RCC’s authority and teachings, which claim sole rights to define what it means to be Catholic. Womenpriest-led communities become spaces where the dominant model of gathering, teaching, and sharing of the RCC is reimagined into places of greater equality and inclusion; they are communities of humans who dare to engage an exodus from the institutional church in order to forge new ways of being and gathering, not unlike the Israelites leaving Egypt behind. Notably, however, in these spaces of greater equality, a clear narrative claiming authority based on equality seems absent, or at least understated. That is, the womenpriests base their claims on religious authority on the traditional foundations of scripture interpretation, the recorded life of Jesus, and community-based leadership. They could strengthen those claims by articulating that their religious authority is based on gender equality—that women and men have equal claims to religious authority.

The womenpriests could not develop and sustain a movement for change without claiming authority, as it is required for the leadership and goals of the movement. However, their dependence on apostolic succession for legitimacy and authority ties the RCWP to a male-dominated, hierarchical history of authority, as well as its abuses of authority, which may ultimately pose limits to the changes they can promulgate or to the development of a broad and inclusive base of support. While the RCWP and its supporters believe it was and is necessary to invoke apostolic succession to be legitimate, critics deem it problematic. This criticism raises the question: how much can one depart from the RCC and still claim Catholicism? The answer, of course, depends on who is asked; within the RCC, those who are selective about what teachings they accept are commonly described as “cafeteria Catholics”, suggesting that there is little room for the freedom to question or dissent (Dillon 1999; Konieczny 2013). Why do the womenpriests hold onto apostolic succession to bolster authority and legitimacy? It may be that in defying Canon Law 1024, the women believed any further departures from RCC teachings would render them voiceless and without credibility, thus limiting their abilities to challenge the church. On the other hand, buying into apostolic succession and making it central to their claims also grants them legitimacy to be a thorn in the side of the RCC. It allows them to be seen as Catholic, especially when presiding at Mass and offering sacraments, and thus gives them cachet with disaffected Roman Catholics, offering the latter a choice about membership, community, and worship.

Again, we come to the delicate choreography of dissent in which the RCWP tries to balance the acceptance and critique of RCC teachings in order to ultimately make a difference.

“The best criticism of the bad is to do it better”. This saying is often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi who aimed to reform aspects of the RCC. The RCWP is moving forward with one way of “doing it better” by being more inclusive and performing the changes they want to see within the institution, and this work necessitates claiming and performing authority.

The performativity of authority as womenpriests is centered in their acceptance of the roots of authority set forth by the RCC, even as they challenge the Church by claiming authority as Catholic priests. They claim authority without the “approval” process of Rome, which defines women as “wrong matter” for ordination. Some Catholics come to worship because they have wanted “to see women on the altar”, and they appreciate the inclusiveness of the communities with like-minded sojourners, the broader views in preaching, and the opportunity to question what they have been taught. For example, womanpriest Patti LaRosa described her experience watching *Pink Smoke*, saying: “I cried the first time I watched it, because it’s so validating to hear so many people say what I feel inside, and to know these are my sisters”. The RCWP allowed LaRosa to find “her tribe” with women “who wanted to remain Roman Catholic and claim their baptismal grace that I am made in the image and likeness of God, male and female, God created them”. The reproduction of RCC structures in the RCWP is part of a balancing act to maintain connections with familiar practices, but it is also part of a healing process for many priests and participants. The RCWP creates spaces for those who long for some RCC structures and a familiar Roman Catholic home, while acknowledging and redressing the pain of women excluded from those RCC structures.

By performing as ordained Roman Catholic priests, the womenpriests engage the mutually reinforcing power of ritual and authority within the structures of Roman Catholicism, which gives the movement power to shift the conceptions of priestly performance and who may embody it. The path the womenpriests have chosen thus far—that is, developing and promoting women’s ways of using authority and doing priesthood and ministry as a vehicle for change—can be compared to that of an ordained women clergy effecting change from within the institution as reported by Kati Niemelä (2011). She found that ordained Lutheran women in Finland were more liberal, ecumenical, and tolerant than their ordained male counterparts, and that the clergy women tended to emphasize the performativity of religion through action to address social problems. Most notably, the clergy women were less likely to be dependent on religious authorities: they were less attached to traditional dogma and emphasized performing or living out the realities of the Gospel mandates to address inequities such as poverty and same-sex marriages. By performing their priesthood vocations differently from within the institutional church, the Finnish clergy women have had a liberalizing effect overall on church policies and practices. Thus, the Finnish Lutheran women clergy are an example of walking a “new path within a path of tradition”, and are a potential model for the RCWP, suggesting that their ongoing ministries may have some effect on the RCC over time.

A comparison a bit closer to home is that of the female pastoral associate in many understaffed (i.e., priestless or priest-sharing) parishes; in these cases, the women perform all the pastoral duties of a priest or administrator except confession and consecrating the Eucharist (Raab 2000, pp. 227–28). While D’Antonio and Dillon (2013, p. 101) note that Catholic respondents overall favor women’s ordination, it is also true that they have difficulty imagining women as priests: the male as priest is “imprinted in Catholic imagination”. They observed that when Catholics have experienced a woman as a parish administrator or pastoral associate, their experiences are positive and their image of who can be a priest expands to include women. Through their ministries and activism, the womenpriests work to expand the Catholic imagination of who can be a priest, who can image Christ, and how she may do that.

Yet the long-term viability of the womenpriest movement and communities is unclear. Many womenpriests are over sixty years old and have small communities that regularly attend Mass. However, in holding these Masses, women are challenging the idea that God's presence can be mediated only by a man ordained by the RCC, and that this presence can be limited or controlled. The RCWP takes a traditionally Catholic view of presence: that it is mediated through communion and community, while also harnessing the more traditionally Protestant view that "God's presence abounds" and that people have no control or ability to limit this presence (Konieczny 2013). The RCC, in claiming that ordaining women is an "attempt at ordination" and that they have no authority to ordain women, indicates that only ordained men have the authority to place limits on God's presence and abilities, or at least what the RCC believes is possible to do with that presence. However, the RCWP, in rejecting limits or controls on divine presence, theologically challenges the RCC at its core, because they mediate presence without limiting it. This cuts into the RCC's narrative that the exclusive way to presence is only through ordained men in the RCC; when anyone acknowledges the RCWP's authority to mediate God's presence to and within the community, the RCC's claim to a monopoly on presence is weakened.

5. Conclusions

Reformation, restoration, or spin-off church? The RCWP's aim seems to be reform, hence their value for maintaining a foot within. However, the choreography seems to take place more outside the boundaries, aiming for reform based on establishing themselves as a viable and visible alternative. How visible they are to the RCC can be seen in the lengths the church takes to excommunicate the women and those who participate in the ordinations, as well as in the 2010 Vatican proclamation declaring women's ordination to be as grave a sin as child sexual molestation, though priests and bishops convicted of the latter are not excommunicated automatically.

Restoration is a close cousin to reformation and is not outside the thinking of the RCWP. Many womenpriests described their theology and ministry as "closer to that of the early church", language that implies a claim to truth and tradition, in keeping with the potential for restoring Catholicism to "the way we think it should be practiced". Whether they aspire to reform or restore Catholicism, the womenpriests see the necessity of maintaining some ties in order to have the authority and credibility to forge a path forward toward those goals.

Authority is a complex dance in which the womenpriests define their acceptance of and departures from the authority and teachings of the RCC. Their practice shows several ways in which they maintain authority structures, such as programs of acceptance, rituals, and apostolic succession. Perhaps the choreography of the dance is slowly evolving to take place on its own terms, stretching the container of the relationship to suit its purposes. Claiming authority between the margins may be challenging to sustain in the long term, yet claiming authority grants them a foundation to create and hold spaces for people now who need to find alternatives to the institutional Catholic Church, who want Catholic identity within community, and who reject the conventional structures and practices of authority.

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Notes

- ¹ The ordained women of this movement use the terminology of “womanpriest” and “womanbishop” to distinguish themselves from ordained men within the Roman Catholic Church.
- ² When referring to the Roman Catholic Church, RCC, or the Institutional Church, we are referring to Catholicism as an institution, an institution that is led by the Vatican, produces *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and understands itself to have the power to excommunicate people from that institution.
- ³ For a foundational discussion of women and authority in a non-Christian context, please see Saba Mahmood’s book, *The Politics of Piety* (Saba Mahmood 2005).
- ⁴ Women interested in pursuing ordination to the priesthood may contact the RCWP organization in their region. See <https://romancatholicwomenpriests.org/>, last accessed 25 February 2022. The program of study varies with a woman’s educational background related to religion, pastoral studies, theology, or related fields. It generally covers the sacraments and pastoral ministry.
- ⁵ The Association of Roman Catholic Womenpriests (ARCWP) was originally part of the RCWP. They became a separate organization in 2010 when ideas about members’ involvement in social activism differed irreconcilably. The ARCWP was originally the southern region of RCWP prior to the separation. Both organizations ordain women nationally and internationally.

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