Opinion

Guest Voices



Women's ordination advocates walk toward St. Peter's Square at the Vatican as part of a witness on Aug. 29, 2022. (NCR photo/Christopher White)

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April 3, 2023

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Forty-five years ago, I wrote a parody of a then-popular Catholic hymn. The same parody works today:

> Be not ordained
> Priesthood is for men only
> Don't follow me, for they will give you grief.

We laughed then, but decades later, it is not very funny. In fact, it is rather tragic.

What is tragic is that women and some supportive men, non-binary people too, have had to put enormous energy into something about which the institutional Roman Catholic Church is so recalcitrant. Imagine if those energies were unleashed to attend to the everyday needs of people who look to ministers for support and guidance, or if the resources, both human and financial, were trained on climate change, anti-racism, reproductive justice and LGBTQI+ rights.

I am not suggesting that the work to make ordination inclusive is unimportant. To the contrary, it is crucial and appreciated. But that it must be done, and redone, and done some more for almost 50 years, is something to lament.

Anecdotal evidence and several studies show that the institutional Roman Catholic Church's continued refusal to ordain women is a major reason why American Catholics (among others) have left it in droves.

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Let's be clear, the bald ask is to allow women to be part of the clerical system and the decision-making apparatus of the institution, and even that is rejected. Proposals for new models of ministry in a renewed church are not even entertained.

In a sense, I am delighted by the exodus. Why participate in and support something in which the majority of people are second-class citizens by design? Women are the majority of Catholics. The contradiction is so blatant as to be beyond discussion.

Airy-fairy notions that a Petrine principle and a Marian principle determine such matters is hocus pocus, not theology. Ditto for the newly minted notion of an "

administrative way" that Pope Francis thinks women are more gifted in, for example, being a secretary or manager. Talk about a Hail Mary pass.

Nuptial imagery of Jesus as the "bridegroom" and the church as the "bride" is theo-babble that no serious theologian would attempt to argue today. Decades ago, the great theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether listened to some poor clerical chap try to explain that women could not be ordained because women do not bear a natural resemblance to Jesus in the Eucharist. She is reported to have asked the priest to show his natural resemblance. Audience laugher ensued and that should have been the end of that. Alas, it was not.

Most people have no idea what these allegedly theological things mean. But they do know that women and nonbinary persons are as much "fit matter" for ordination as people with male genitalia. The skills, commitment and training necessary to minister have absolutely nothing to do with anatomy, symbolically or otherwise. Period. Biblical and theological scholars settled these questions a generation ago. Still, some people trot them out as if for the first time. Be not deceived.

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What needs to be discussed is whether *anyone* should be ordained into a clerical system that has long outlived any usefulness it might have had. It has been the cause of serious harm to many people, including priests.

Also under reasonable consideration is the false link between ordination and jurisdiction, whether ordained persons have any more right to make decisions in an egalitarian church than anyone else.

Assuming, as I do, that the answer is no, then the whole current synodal structure needs to be reconfigured into what the Vatican dreads, namely, a democratic assembly, in order to have any claim on the Catholic community's time and attention. Otherwise, the synod, whose final document is voted on by clerics, and implemented, or not, by the pope, is simply a charade with a predetermined ending, all of the earnest protestations about the Spirit notwithstanding.

The Brazilians found that out the hard way in the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon. There is no reason to think this international process will be any different with regard to women. Just because there is a call for grassroots input does not mean, unless the grassroots decide, that such input will be reflected in the outcome.

These are not easy questions, but at least they are worth discussing, even disagreeing about, as we get clear about what kind of a church we want or want to leave. But discussing ordination in terms of gender and sexuality is needlessly repetitive and a waste of time.

Women and nonbinary people join men in many forms of priestly ministry. Roman Catholic women priests, whether through the eponymous organizations or in other denominations where they have chosen to minister, are engaged in multivalent ministries. That is now a fact, whether the Vatican acknowledges it or not, whether people like it or not.

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Lately, I have heard some Catholic women say that their male pastors are afraid of them, that they scare the men when they preach. Despite their rejection unto excommunication in some cases, women ministers continue to put the needs of people and the planet ahead of their own safety and security. They don their work clothes and offer a word of hope. They tend to the crying needs that the hierarchical Roman Catholic Church would prefer to ignore rather than affirm women's diaconal and presbyteral work as valid and licit.

Just as regrets are for dinner parties, fear is for therapy. The men who hold the votes in the Roman Catholic Church are not afraid of women as if women were about to rob them in an elevator or maim them in a street fight. They are afraid of one day having to face the fact that the opposition to women's ordination is based on patriarchal privilege and the failure to accept human equality, full stop.

Clerics' refusal to change the customs, structures, attitudes and practices that keep them in power, not their fear of women, is what needs attention. And that attention is to power-sharing without apology.

The consequences of not taking this reality on board are unfolding for all to see. People are lied to when they are told that the church cannot ordain women because of some God-given reason. Common-sense theological reflection says otherwise. Hiding behind God-language is an old theological sleight of hand to obscure power. That era is over. The exits to the church are well marked and increasingly well used.

My heart is with the people who do not have a house church or a base community to exit to as they leave the institution. It is their pastoral needs and sacramental wants that are ignored so that an outdated power structure can endure. They are often subject to inferior quality preaching, liturgy and pastoral care when better is available but not allowed in the continued non-ordination of women.

Inclusive ordination is not the answer to all Catholic problems. It is not even one I like very much, as I question whether anyone needs to be ordained. But without it, and without participatory structures of decision-making, there is only grief.

A version of this story appeared in the **April 28-May 11, 2023** print issue under the headline: Be not ordained.