

How the remotely possible could become real

Maureen Daly | Feb. 12, 2010



(Paul Lachine)

Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, expresses her amazement at reading, for the first time, a description of a friendship between two women.

“Chloe liked Olivia,” Woolf reads in a novel by a young woman. “And then it struck me how immense a change was there. Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature,” writes Woolf. “And I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women were represented as friends. ... But almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men. It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen’s day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex. And how small a part of a woman’s life is that; and how little can a man know even of that.”

I read *A Room of One's Own* nearly 40 years ago, but I remembered that passage and I felt something of the same thrill while reading *Ordained* by L.C. Anthony.

The novel imagines a time in the near future when a new pope is chosen. A group of American bishops seize the moment to force the new Pope John XXIV to revise the restrictions on ordination.

The story is told through the voice of Kelly More, wife, mother, and pastoral administrator of a small-town parish in Michigan, yet the novel reads more like a case study for graduate courses in pastoral counseling or parish administration than like a piece of literature.

The dialog is clunky. Characters are sketched in phrases straight from the counseling couch, a performance review, or a memorandum sizing up the political opposition.

For example, Kelly’s obstructive bishop “had the look of a career churchman, outgoing and friendly on the surface but cautious within, watching for anything that might get in the way of his ambitions or test his authority.” But by the end of the story, “a more authentic self was breaking through.”

Her bishop tells her that the priest called in to say Mass at Kelly's parish "was threatened by your leadership skills, your candor and honesty, your liturgical presence and pastoral style, and the great love the people had for you."

Authentic self? Leadership skills? Liturgical presence? Such terms may be useful shorthand in a counselor's notes, but unlikely to pepper natural dialogue.

Kelly's closest colleague, her spiritual director, is introduced in lines from a job description: "His gift was spiritual direction, helping people see what was happening in their lives, what made sense or no sense, recognizing the graces and pitfalls." He has "an ability to listen" and, Kelly says, "This was a mutual relationship -- as close as any friendship between a man and a woman could be."

By L.C. Anthony
While not a great novel, it is a fine playbook. Whole passages could be lifted for a public statement on why the church needs more priests and why the candidate pool should include women and married men. Here you will find: how to run a crisis parish meeting, how to manage staff as collaborators, how to conduct a five-day discernment process when facing a life-changing decision, and how to organize a rally, including when to schedule meal breaks, how to label buses, and who should preside at Mass.

I don't know who Anthony is, but I suspect she has attended more than one Call to Action conference.

Not least, there are detailed instructions by a retired bishop on how to conduct and document a woman's ordination -- a bishop, by the way, who bears a strong resemblance to Tom Gumbleton.

There are some strong dramatic moments, in rallies and at the Vatican, and the plot includes a month Kelly and her family spend in hiding, taking up residence in an immigrant shanty town. Though this section is marred by some sentimentalizing about the faith of simple people, it is a fine use of the idea of hiding in plain sight, a reflection on the isolation and invisibility of immigrants and other marginalized. There, I've caught the author's church-speak bug.

Who is L.C. Anthony? An inquiry to her publisher said that the author preferred to remain anonymous "but hopes this story might come true in her lifetime."

I was surprised to hear that the author was a she, because the book reads more like a committee report than an individual voice. Yet it is carefully written, as good committee reports are. The novel lays out, week by week and month by month, how a group of bishops could pressure a pope into calling a worldwide council and revising the rules of ordination.

So, it is not a great book, but if you care about women's ordination and want to see it in your lifetime, it is a book you want on your shelves. Better yet, it is a book you want on your bishop's shelf. It would give him a guide to how the remotely possible could become real.

Virginia Woolf published *A Room of One's Own* in 1929, more than 80 years ago. It was a venerable classic when I read it more than four decades later, in the midst of feminism's second wave. Woolf was writing soon after British women were granted the right to control their own money, had first received the vote, and were first admitted to Oxford and Cambridge. She speculated then that women would be capable of so many things "if we live another century" and "if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think."

"In a hundred years," writes Woolf, "women will have ceased to be the protected sex. Logically they will take part in all the activities and exertions that were once denied them."

The decades are passing.

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ent women writers reflecting on women who write.

Erpsmer, who run a school called Women Writing for (a) Change, a creative, therapeutic and spiritual practice.

Articles of the daily and domestic [2]

Melissa Musick Nussbaum says that she is drawn to writers -- they are women -- who observe the contours and appreciate the significance of the daily and the domestic.

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Diane Scharper recommends five women writers who, she said, "can provide us with salutary insights into ourselves as we live in a world full of international tensions."

Links:
[1] <http://ncronline.org/node/16940>

[2] <http://ncronline.org/node/16930>
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[3] <http://ncronline.org/node/16937>

Maureen E. Daly reviews a book titled *Ordained* and in it finds a plan on how to pressure a pope into calling a worldwide council and revising the rules of ordination.

[4] <http://ncronline.org/node/16926>
[5] <https://www.ncronline.org/donate?clickSource=article-end>