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Women priests offer differing approaches to valid ordination

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An icon of St. Irenaeus

In 2002 seven Roman Catholic women were ordained in Austria on the Danube River by an independent Catholic bishop, Romulo Antonio Braschi. Later unnamed Roman Catholic bishops ordained some of these women priests as bishops. These women bishops, in turn, have been ordaining other women deacons, priests and bishops. From this beginning there has developed a movement, Roman Catholic Womenpriests (RCWP), which presently claims four women bishops and 45 women priests in the United States, as well as others in Europe and Canada. This movement has shaped a thoughtful ecclesiology defining itself both as in valid succession in the Roman Catholic tradition and also as a valid reform that is reclaiming the authentic discipleship of equals of the earliest church based on the redemptive mission of Christ.(1)

Rejecting the papal declaration of May 28, 2008, that the women and the male bishops who originally ordained them are "excommunicated *latae sententiae*" (automatically), RCWP declared that "we will continue to serve our beloved church in a renewed priestly ministry that welcomes all to celebrate the sacraments in inclusive, Christ-centered, Spirit-empowered communities wherever we are called." RCWP claims to stand in "apostolic succession" based on the validity of the episcopal ordination of their founding bishop:

> The ordinations of Roman Catholic Womenpriests are valid because of our unbroken line of apostolic succession within the Roman Catholic Church. The principal consecrating Roman Catholic male bishop who ordained our first women bishops is a bishop with a line of unbroken apostolic succession within the Roman Catholic Church in full communion with the Pope. Therefore, our bishops validly ordain deacons, priests and bishops. Consequently, all qualified candidates, including baptized ministers and priests from other Christian traditions, who are presented to our bishops for ordination are ordained by the laying on of hands into the same line of apostolic succession in the Roman Catholic Church.(2)

Clearly the pope does not agree with this view. For him the women bishops, priests and deacons ? as well as the originating bishops ? are automatically excommunicated, based on the fact that these ordinations took place against church teaching and without papal approval. Besides this, there is the theological assumption that women by their very nature are incapable of receiving valid ordination as priests in the Roman Catholic Church.(3) (The Vatican mentality toward women was revealed on July 15, 2010, with the release of a document lumping sexual abuse of children by priests and women's ordination as both "very grave crimes.") What then is the concept of "apostolic succession" and "full communion with the pope" that this movement

assumes can be unaffected by this profound conflict with papal authority?

Before discussing this issue, let us look at a different approach to valid ordination that has emerged in a faith community in San Diego, Calif., under the leadership of one of the Roman Catholic Womenpriests, Jane Via. Desiring to create and be a part of a vibrant Catholic community that reflected her vision of what such a community should be, Via, a religious educator and lawyer, developed, with the help of ex-priest Rod Stephens, the Mary Magdalene Apostle Catholic Community (MMACC) in 2005.

For some years Nancy Corran, a woman of Protestant background who holds a degree in theology from Oxford and a Master's of Divinity degree from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, Calif., has served with Jane Via and Rod Stephens as a pastoral associate. In 2009 Corran decided that she wanted to become a Catholic in the context of the Mary Magdalene community. The leadership of the Mary Magdalene church decided to call her as a priest to their community. However they decided not to call a bishop from the RCWP movement to come and ordain her, but rather to ordain her as a collective action of their faith community. They based their right to do this on their reading of early church history in which they learned that Christians in the early centuries had called priests and ordained them through the collective action of local faith communities. This ordination of Corran to the deaconate and then to the priesthood by the collective action of MMACC took place July 30 and 31, 2010. Everyone in the community, including the children, laid hands on Corran and signed the official paper as her ordainers.

This decision by MMACC has caused consternation among some in the RCWP movement. Some have even suggested that this action undermines the "apostolic succession" of their movement. By implication the ordination of Corran would be outside of this lineage of "apostolic succession." The emergence of this difference sparks inquiry into the basis of this concept of "apostolic succession" which has become so important for the RCWP movement, and upon which they base the validity of their own ordinations, despite its repudiation by the pope. Why does the leadership of MMACC feel they can disregard this, even though Via was herself ordained in this movement? What does "apostolic succession" as the basis of valid ordination of priests by bishops mean?

This concept of apostolic succession is widely contested. Although claimed by Roman Catholicism, most Protestants, based on historical studies of early Christianity, see this as an historical fiction with little basis in "apostolic" or first century Christianity. In the view of most modern church historians, first and second century Christianity was highly diverse. Christianity manifested itself in several movements that reflected a variety of world views of the time. In many cities of the eastern Mediterranean, such as Alexandria, some of the first Christian groups were Gnostics of various kinds.

According to the gospels, Jesus chose 12 disciples in his life time.(4) After his death, one of them, Judas Iscariot, the traitor of Jesus, was replaced by Matthias by collective action of the remaining 11 disciples (Acts I: 15-26). But these 12 disciples have left little record of evangelizing Gentiles and founding churches around the world. In fact, the original idea of the 12 disciples probably was intended to represent the 12 tribes of Israel, not a group of worldwide founders of churches from which a succession of bishops descended.

The concept of a Gentile church drawn from all nations originated with the evangelizing mission of Paul, himself not a member of Jesus' original disciples, but rather a convert to the Christian movement after Jesus' death. In the story of the spread of Christianity outside Palestine, the names of most of the 12 disciples disappear. The only ones claimed to be related to areas outside Palestine are Peter, associated with Antioch and also with Rome (in death), John in Ephesus, although not as a church founder, and Thomas in India, the last of questionable historicity.(5)

The concept of a monarchical episcopacy; that is, city-based churches headed by a bishop in hierarchical power above elders (presbyters) and deacons, emerged slowly between the late first and early third centuries. Ignatius

of Antioch claimed such a monarchical episcopacy for himself in the church of Antioch in letters written in the early 2nd century on his way to martyrdom in Rome, but he makes no mention of Peter as the founding apostle of his church.(6) Irenaeus of Lyons, combating various gnosticisms in his writings *Against the Heresies* in the late second century, expounds the idea of a succession of teachers that guarantee apostolic teaching versus gnostics. For him the church of Rome is the primary example of such a succession of bishop-teachers. (7)

Several "tools" of orthodoxy emerged in this period. One was a canonical New Testament composed of writings known to be of older tradition and hence as "apostolic." These were seen as distinguishable from the plurality of writings circulating among the churches that used the names of apostles ? such as the Gospel of Peter, the Acts of Peter and the Revelation of Peter, the Acts of Andrew and the Acts of John ? but perceived as heretical in content.(8) A historical lineage of teaching going back to the 1st or early 2nd centuries, guaranteed by a succession of bishop-teachers, was seen as validating this apostolic tradition. These tools emerged in order to separate what was being defined as orthodoxy against the plurality of other traditions of a more gnostic type.

In the process of defining this "apostolic tradition" against the "heresies," writers like Irenaeus constructed an historical argument that posited that what was emerging as "orthodoxy" in the late 2nd century was the original teaching of Jesus and the apostles ? while the various other forms of Christianity were decried as later deviations. Modern historians generally have decided that the historical reality was more the opposite of this schema. In other words, many variant Christianities were actually earlier. What was being defined as orthodoxy was a construct that emerged later. The successful purge of this earlier diversity allowed the emerging orthodoxy to claim historical originality.(9)

A lineage of bishops descending from founding apostles of leading churches was the key idea in this emerging claim of "apostolic teaching." In this construct the twelve disciples were sent forth around the world, founded churches in key cities with themselves as founding bishops, and gave each church an apostolic teaching that was identical. The succession of bishops descended from the founding apostle carried this same teaching unchanged through the generations. This concept of apostolic succession, with successions of bishop-descendents of founding apostles, bears little basis in the historical reality of how Christianity actually spread, although it was a useful (and doubtless sincerely believed) idea to define an emerging orthodoxy for churches seeking a common front against their rivals.

Rome was an early claimant for this role of guarantor of apostolic teaching, although, interestingly enough, the monarchical bishop appears to have been slow to emerge there. The 2nd century "orthodox" Roman church was one among several Christian groups in the city. But this emerging church maintained into the third century a more collective form of church government in which the bishop was a leading elder, rather than a monarchical bishop in hierarchical relation over the other elders. (10)

A significant document that testifies to the tradition of this Roman church is that of Hippolytus of Rome, a Greek-born presbyter of this church who wrote in the early 3rd century a treatise called *The Apostolic Tradition*. Hippolytus was a rigorist thinker who sought to exclude various heresies from acceptance. He was briefly elected bishop as a rival to a more lax leader of the church, Callistus, who later tradition defines as "pope" from 217-222 A.D. Hippolytus, writing in *The Apostolic Tradition*, reflects his own memory of how things were done in this church back into the mid-second century. Significantly he assumes a collective authority in which the church as a whole or "all the people" together call the bishop. The presbyters and "any bishops who happen to be present" give their consent and lay hands on this leader. Clearly what is understood as the church order of mid-second to early third century Rome is one of collective calling and ordination by the local faith community as a whole.(11) This is the tradition claimed by Mary Magdalene Apostle Catholic Community today.

The notion of the "apostles," that is, the 12 disciples chosen by Jesus, founding churches and inaugurating a succession of monarchical bishops, became formulated in its historical form in the late second and third centuries and appears as a set idea in the *History of the Church* by Eusebius, who wrote successive versions of this work from 305 to 330 AD. For Eusebius, orthodoxy was guaranteed by apostolic succession through the foundation of churches by apostles and the passing down of identical apostolic teaching through their succession of bishops in each church. Eusebius has many references to bishops of various churches from Asia Minor to Italy, but he can only produce continuous lists from apostolic times to his own time for four leading churches: Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch and Rome.(12) He has a few partial lists for other churches, such as Corinth, but does not claim apostolic founders for them.

Careful examination of his lists for the four leading churches raises the question whether any of these were actually founded by one of the 12 apostles. Jerusalem claims as its founding leader, James, the brother of Jesus, who was not a disciple in Jesus' time, but was converted to Christianity after his death. The names of 12 Jewish leaders of this church "of the circumcision" are claimed from the time of James until the Roman destruction of the city in 139 A.D. when this church disappeared. But it is hard to imagine that this extensive list actually represents a succession of monarchical bishops, rather than names of coexisting leaders. When this church disappeared in 139 A.D., a second list of bishops is claimed for a gentile church in a newly founded Roman city near Jerusalem, but one is puzzled about how this list can be seen as continuing the line from James, Jesus brother.

The lineage of Alexandria does not claim an apostle founder but cites Mark, author of the Gospel of that name, as its founder. But the succession of bishops of that city is likely a later construct, as orthodoxy gradually asserted itself against earlier gnosticisms. In Antioch, "where the disciples were first called Christians"

(Acts11:26) Peter was apparently present on more than one occasion. Eusebius claims Peter was the first bishop of Antioch, with Ignatius as his second successor,(13) but Ignatius himself seems unaware of this.

Rome, which became the model for the idea of apostolic succession, claims both Peter and Paul as founders. But we know that the church of Rome already existed at the time of Paul's ministry in Greece, when Peter had not been to Rome. Peter may have been martyred there, but did not found the church of Rome and was probably not a leader there, much less a "bishop." So, in each case, the connection of later bishop lists to a supposedly founding apostle fades on examination.

Not only is there a historical gap between apostles and later bishop lists, but also, this original concept of apostolic succession that developed in the late second to fourth centuries did not originally have anything to do with passing down the priestly power to do Eucharist from Jesus to apostles to bishops (who were thereby empowered to ordain other bishops and priests with the charism to do Eucharist). Apostolic succession was originally about apostolic teaching,(14) not priestly power to do Eucharist. It was a way of claiming a unitary form of Christian teaching from Jesus through the apostles for a lineage of bishop-teachers that could be defined across churches against heretics, thus ruling out the earlier diversity of forms of Christianity.

The idea of apostolic succession as a transmission of Eucharistic power from Jesus and the apostles to bishops is a later idea that emerges slowly to replace the earlier emphasis on a lineage of apostolic teaching. It becomes fully developed only in the 12th century when a concept of priesthood is defined based on the power to "confect" the Eucharist (that is, the power to turn the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ), as the central idea of ordination, excluding earlier ideas of ordination based on installation into various offices. This earlier view of ordination as installation into holding offices allowed various people to be seen as ordained, including women as queens, abbesses and deaconesses.

As ordination came to be linked primarily with priesthood and its ability to "confect" the Eucharist the idea of ordination as installation into an office was eliminated and, with it, the possibility of women being ordained. Only men who share Christ's maleness could inherit this power to do Eucharist which was supposedly passed down from Christ himself to his twelve apostles and from them to their bishop-descendents. Thus the triumph of a priestly eucharistic concept of ordination, passed down through apostolic succession, is itself an integral part of a process in which women were eliminated as ordainable.(15)

Ironically, it is this 12th century concept of apostolic succession as the transmission of the power to do Eucharist which is claimed by the RCWP movement as they lift up the episcopal ordination of their founding bishops as proof of the validity of their own ordinations. This concept of valid ordination, transmitted through the apostolic succession from their founding bishops, works only if one implicitly assumes a mechanistic view of the transmission of this power from one bishop to another. In other words, ordination in apostolic succession is assumed to transmit a kind of spiritual power as a personal "possession" which the ordained persons can dispose of as they wish ? apart from agreement with the pope as authorizer in the Roman Catholic Church of who can or should be ordained.

This power can then be assumed to continue in force, even allowing the bishop ordaining the women to be described as in "full communion with the pope" despite being excommunicated by the pope. Thus being in "communion" with the pope in this context has nothing to do with being in *agreement* with the pope on who can be ordained, but rather as possessing this ordaining power as a personal endowment that can be transmitted to others by engaging in the sacramental act of ordaining.

By contrast, the leaders of Mary Magdalene Apostle Catholic Community go back to a much earlier view of church and ordination closer to apostolic times, manifested in Hippolytus' treatise on *The Apostolic Tradition*. Here ordination has to do with installing a person in an office of teacher and worship leader for a faith community who "all the people" of that community call and ordain collectively.

Does this mean that the MMACC community is "right" in their views, and the RCWP should abandon their faulty claims to apostolic succession? This is not the point. Rather both movements can recognize their common ground on which both can claim the validity of their divergent forms of ordination. This common ground lies in a history and tradition of Christian churches as faith communities linked to the past through memory and through constant imaginative efforts to reconstruct what is most life-giving in their traditions and to base themselves on faithful reproduction of that life-giving tradition. RCWP and MMACC are both seeking to be "apostolic" in their thinking and living through different versions of that process.

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(1) "Ordinations," romancatholicwomenpriests.org
(2) Ibid.
(3) This view of women's incapacity to be ordained due to the defective nature of femaleness was developed by Thomas Aquinas, based on Aristotelian anthropology. See Kari Borreson, *Subordination and Equivalence: The Nature and Role of Women in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), pp. 236-239.
(4) The lists of 12 apostles are found in Matthew 10:2-4, Mark 3:16-19, Luke 6:14-16. Acts 1:13 contains eleven names, dropping Judas Iscariot. The lists are not fully consistent. Matthew and Mark list a Thaddeus. Luke and Acts lack this name, but have Jude, son of James instead.
(5) See the Wikipedia articles on "John the Apostle" and "Thomas the Apostle."
(6) See *The Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, Gerald G. Walsh, trans. *The Apostolic Fathers, The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 1 (NY: CIMA Publishing Company, 1947), pp. 83-127.
(7) Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, III.3,23
(8) See Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).
(9) The scholar whose work helped establish this view is Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).
(10) See Kurt Aland, *A History of Christianity*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 120.
(11) *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, Burton Scott Easton, trans. (Archon Books,1962).
(12) Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, G.A. Williamson, trans. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965) appendix, pp. 415-17.
(13) Ibid., p. 145 (Book III.36)
(14) See Irenaeus, op.cit., who refers to the succession of bishops at Rome as teachers who all agreed in teaching "right doctrine," offering no "secret teaching."
(15) For a key book showing the development of this kind of view of ordination and the suppression of earlier forms of ordination that included women, see Gary Macy, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

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