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Woman deacon recants, seeks reunion with church

by Zoe Ryan

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Members of Roman Catholic Womenpriests gather April 19, 2010. (Photo courtesy of the Roman Catholic Womenpriests Web site.)

A California woman who participated in a Roman Catholic Womenpriests ordination ceremony to the diaconate in 2007 has publicly recanted that decision in order to return to the church.

Norma Jean Coon of San Diego released a statement Feb. 8 on her Web site.

"I wish to renounce the alleged ordination and publicly state that I did not act as a deacon as a part of this group except on two occasions, when I read the Gospel once at Mass and distributed Communion once at this same Mass," the statement said.

San Diego chancellor Rodrigo Valdivia confirmed to *NCR* that Coon "did request remission of her censure to Bishop [Robert] Brom" of San Diego.

"The lifting of the censure which a person who participates in an illicit ordination incurs is reserved to the Holy See," Valdivia wrote in an e-mail, adding that Coon's case has been forwarded to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the diocese has not received a response yet.

A representative of Roman Catholic Womenpriests movement told *NCR* that Coon had not been active or even in contact with the movement for more than three years. In January, Coon contacted the movement informing them of her decision to renounce ties with the group.

Coon is the first woman who was ordained through a women's ordination association to recant her decision, according to Roman Catholic Womenpriests, an international initiative that ordains men and women.

The Vatican labels the ordination of women in the Catholic church as a grave offense and participants are excommunicated *latae sententiae*, or automatically.

Coon said in her statement that she withdrew from the program two weeks after the 2007 ordination ceremony, "because I realized that I had made a mistake in studying for the priesthood. ... I confess the authority of the Holy Father on these issues of ordination and recognize that Christ founded the ordination only for men."

Coon called her act "illegitimate and not recognized by the Roman Catholic church" and she acknowledged that she was excommunicated *latae sententiae*.

"Finally, I relinquish all connection to the program of Roman Catholic Womenpriests and I disclaim the allegations. I offer my sincerest apologies to those whose lives I have offended or scandalized by my actions."

Coon's one-page Web site, www.normajeancoon.com, contains her statement and a prayer that also requests her decision, mentions she has been married for 47 years, and asks "your blessings on my bishop and my pastor and priests in Rome who have assisted me in the process of being reinstated into the Roman Catholic church."

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NCR contacted Coon twice by e-mail. She declined to make any comments.

Suzanne Avison Thiel, administrator for the Western region of Roman Catholic Womenpriests-USA, told NCR in an e-mail message that Coon had had no contact with them from shortly after she was ordained on July 22, 2007, in Santa Barbara, Calif., until Jan. 1 this year when she informed the group she was renouncing her affiliation.

"Norma Coon (at her request) is no longer a member of Roman Catholic Womenpriests-USA and is in no way affiliated with us or any of our RCWP activities," Thiel wrote in the e-mail.

Bridget Mary Meehan, communication representative for the group, said Coon e-mailed her Jan. 1 asking that Meehan remove videos and photographs of her on the movement's Web site. To be reinstated into the church, Coon explained to Meehan, she must dissolve all connection with the group. Meehan said she complied.

Members of Roman Catholic Womenpriests said that Coon had experienced personal family trauma, including health issues and the death of her 42-year-old son, who died in 2010 from a burst aortic aneurysm, according to the obituary on *The San Diego Union-Tribune* Web site.

"She is our sister, our beloved sister, and we wanted to help her follow her conscience," Meehan told NCR. "There are no hard feelings. We understand totally."

Meehan said that Roman Catholic Womenpriests warns the women who join them "that they're going to be excommunicated." The typical length of preparation to the diaconate is one year, but it varies

depending on the person. The program is individualized for each person and includes an intake clinical interview and psychological screenings, among other things.

Because women's ordination is not allowed in the Catholic church, those who participate in ceremonies confront conflict within the church.

In May 2010, the death of Janine Denomme, 45, of Chicago made news when she was denied a funeral in a Catholic church. She had been ordained through Roman Catholic Womenpriests.

Roman Catholic Womenpriests released a statement Feb. 24 regarding Coon's departure: "She has every right to change her mind and has an obligation to follow her conscience. We remain ordained Roman Catholic Womenpriests who continue to follow our informed consciences and, simply put, obeying God trumps obeying the pope."

It continues: "It is the firm conviction of the Association of Roman Catholic Womenpriests that women who are ordained into a renewed priestly ministry are following primacy of conscience."

The Roman Catholic Womenpriests international initiative began in 2002 when seven women were ordained on the Danube River, between Austria and Germany, by male bishops. Today, there are 124 priests, bishops, deacons and candidates in their organization. They claim apostolic succession.

Last year, the Vatican revised church laws that govern the handling of what it calls "grave crimes" and for the first time added the "attempted sacred ordination of a woman" to that list (*NCR*, Aug. 6).

Formerly, cases such as Coon's could have been handled in the local bishop's office, according to Oblate Fr. Francis Morrissey, professor of canon law at St. Paul University in Ottawa. "All these cases now have to go to the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and we have to await their decision."

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