

## “I Name Myself in Power”: The Roman Catholic Womenpriests and the Performance of Relational Authority

Claire Maria Chambers

### Introduction: Relational Authority

Western culture has yet to construct the social normativity of women as figures of authority. United States Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, when asked when there will be “enough” women on the Supreme Court, answered, “When there are nine” (“When Will There Be Enough Women on the Supreme Court?” 2015). The resulting buzz around her response (which ranged from cheers to accusations of sexism) illustrates how difficult it continues to be for the cultural imaginary to conceive of women as human, natural, and normal, especially when it comes to embodying authority. Such resistance to women as powerful authorities may be invisible to many in culture at large, but in the Roman Catholic Church, the discussion of the possibility of women in the priesthood—that is, as literally embodying the authoritative presence of Christ on earth—has split opinions across the world (Patrick 2015).

Traditionally, the Catholic priesthood has been reserved for men alone, and canonically, that law still holds. Canon law 1024 states that “A baptized male alone receives ordination validly” (Vatican 2017b). While most Christian denominations accept female leadership in some form, and the Anglican and Episcopalian orders have been ordaining women at least to the diaconate since 1974 (although there have been historical exceptions), the option for ordination of women in what some term the “hierarchical” Roman Catholic Church remains, in the words of Pope Francis, a “closed door” (Goodstein 2016). However, a number of Catholics have challenged the authority of the Vatican. As opposed to the “hierarchical church,” independent, “break-away,” or “inclusive” Catholic communities have existed since the 1870s (Byrne 2016; Plummer 2006). Among them, the Roman Catholic Womenpriests (hereafter Womenpriests), a reform movement internal to the Roman Catholic Church, are something of an exception. In 2002, the Womenpriests responded to the gendered exclusivism of the priesthood with decisive action: since the Vatican would not approve the ordination of women priests any time soon,<sup>1</sup> these faithful women sought the sacrament by other means, resulting in the ordination of seven women on a vessel in the international waters of the Danube River. The river provided a neutral place for the ceremony, outside the jurisdiction of any local bishop who would be obligated to respond to irregular sacraments taking place within their diocese. Although the Vatican has accused the Womenpriests of inciting schism, they understand themselves to be independent but also fully Roman Catholic, with their priests in full succession in the line of Peter. By sidestepping papal authority on the matter of ordination, they not only challenge the perceived sexism and discrimination within the Catholic Church, but also rewrite the sacramental theology of priesthood, as well as the priest’s sacerdotal function.

---

**Claire Maria Chambers** teaches dramatic literature at Sogang University in Seoul. She writes at the crossroads of religion, culture, theatre, and performance, with special interests in negative theology and performance philosophy. Her articles and reviews can be found in the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, *Performance Research*, *Theatre Journal*, and *Theatre Research International*, among others. She is the author *Negative Epistemology and Performance Studies: Performance Apophatics* (Palgrave MacMillan 2017).

This article will explore the Womenpriests' performance of the authority of women in ways that challenge institutional hierarchy and affirm inclusivity and equality, but still maintain forms of power. The Womenpriests' performance of priesthood names the individual as well as the community as sources of power in a manner that creates what I will call "relational authority." Relational authority regards dwelling with others and the recognition of inherent, human worth as sources of meaning that are creative, co-creative, and re-creative. The spiritual narratives, rituals, and liturgies of the Roman Catholic Womenpriests offer the scholar of performance studies another paradigm for performance itself as relational, one that helps us think creatively about poststructuralist criticisms of authoritative meaning. While the poststructuralist deferral and dispersal of meaning may sometimes lead to nonproductive relativisms, such forms of criticism also highlight the web-like interdependency of signifiers. De Saussure's famous paradox that "in language, there are only differences, without positive terms" opens up the relational space of meaning-making as a process while it empties notions of authoritative origins of their power (de Saussure 1959, 120). I take my cues from existing theories that consider the social dimension of participation, rather than the individual viewer or actor, in collaborative performance. Such theories work toward the "elimination of the audience" in order to erase the authority of theatrical convention (Kaprow 1966) and the subversion of power via "deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 141–42), and follow the "anti-theological" trajectory of the refusal to fix meaning to performances or signifieds of any kind (Barthes 1977). As Claire Bishop notes, the "constructed situations" of participatory art practices "produce new social relationships and thus new social realities" (Bishop 2006, 13).

"Relational authority" recalls the "relational aesthetics" of Nicolas Bourriaud. Bourriaud suggests the possibility of relational art, that is, "art that takes as its theoretical horizon the sphere of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an autonomous and *private* symbolic space" (Bourriaud 1998, 160, emphasis original). The work of art—which for the purposes of this article can include performance, ritual, liturgy, and personal narratives of spiritual awakening—is a social interstice. Bourriaud adopts the term from Marx, who used it to speak of trading communities that escape capitalist economy (barter, gifts, etc.). "An interstice is a space in social relations which, although it fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, suggests possibilities for exchanges other than those that prevail within the system" (161). Aesthetically, relational art is mutational, rather than autopoietic; it is its own discovery in the wake of collective action, rather than proffered as an object to a viewership. Relational authority, I suggest, follows in the wake of relational aesthetics. It is authority that transforms and is also transformational, rather than unilateral. It is the discovery of its own power in the wake of community discernment, rather than a demand for obedience. The performance of priesthood by women in the Roman Catholic Church is such an interstice of new possibilities for the exchange of authority and power. Their actions have been a matter of some controversy in the Catholic world at large, to say the least.

The Womenpriests are an international organization, but this article will focus on my interviews and participatory observations with communities in California and Washington in the United States. Although the Womenpriests debate the meaning of priesthood within their ranks, by and large they are committed to a progressive politics that not only is open to women in the priesthood, but also non-celibacy and the inclusion and affirmation of all genders and sexual identities (Reuther, Via, and Hunt 2011). They hope to call out the inadequacy of the Vatican-led hierarchy, creatively revising its structure of power relations by practising ritual ordination of women priests in the full line of apostolic succession. As resistance leaders, they exist in a grey zone between male and female, ordained and non-ordained, legitimate and illegitimate in order to destroy the dichotomies they understand to be destroying their church. In blunt language, the Womenpriests see the Vatican's

theology as rigidified ideology, while they see themselves as arguing for a fluid theology of liberation and inclusivity. The greatest challenge that the Womenpriests pose to the Vatican and the traditional Catholic community is that they affirm the priesthood of all believers in a radical way, insisting that any person can speak and act *alter christus*—as Christ, and as another Christ. The Womenpriests’ affirmation of the priesthood of all is a radical re-visioning of the Church itself as being brought back to its first-century roots, when, some historians contend, special sacramental roles did not create an elite class of ministers held apart from the general congregation, but where a community of adult believers served one another as equals (Wijngaards 2002).

There are several facets of the relationship between the Womenpriests and the institutional church which I shall introduce below, but the issue of priestly representation is central. The dogma is that only a male priest can act *alter christus*—as Christ. The Womenpriests’ objection to this tradition and theology is that excluding women (and queer people, and non-celibate people) from the priesthood stultifies the ability of anyone to be Christ for everyone and makes the priesthood into a club rather than a vocation to which the Holy Spirit may call anyone (Rue 2008, 18). They understand the role of the priest to be representative of a community in flux. For the Vatican, representation is a direct and stable lineage from Christ, through Peter, and onward down to the present Pope and the college of Roman Catholic male priests. For the Womenpriests, representation is a relationship with both the human other and the divine that cannot be made exclusive to one kind or type of “legitimate” body. They seek to undo the violent determination of patriarchal language by unsaying oppressive structures of fixed gender roles. They strive to speak the ineffable quality of their experience as excluded from the very community they feel called by God to serve.

After reflecting on the meaning of performance as a relational “dwelling with” via an interview with Womanpriest Diane Whalen of Holy Wisdom Inclusive Catholic Community in Olympia, Washington, I will turn next to the issue of speaking the priesthood both against and alongside the institutional church. As the Womenpriests are *unsaid* by the Vatican, which denies their ordinations, rendering them null “imitations” of sacraments, their interpellation into the language of hierarchy also gives them a place from which to unsay it on their own terms. This discussion sets the stage for an exploration of the liturgical practices of womanpriest-inclusive communities. Along with Magdalene Catholic Community in Los Gatos, California, led by Juanita Cordero, I will consider the performance of liturgy as a collective performance of authority (the relational authority of the community), and with Sophia in Trinity Community in San Francisco, led by Victoria Rue, I will explore the “priesthood of all believers” through individual acts of participation in the larger context of a radical Christian theology (the relational authority of the individual).

### **Wisdom and “Dwelling” as Performance: Reflections on An Interview with Reverend Diane Whalen**

Richard Schechner describes the infinitive “to perform” as in relation to “being,” “doing,” “showing doing,” and “explaining ‘showing doing,’” where “being” is existence itself, “doing is the activity of all that exists,” “showing doing” is performing, and “explaining ‘showing doing’” is performance studies (Schechner 2013, 28).<sup>2</sup> In Christian theology, the conflation of being and doing undergirds Christology and the understanding of salvation in a liturgical and community context. Not only is Christ the word *incarnate* (in his being, he is God made manifest to creation), he is the active presence of God, the word as *spoken* (Heyward 1976, 35–38). The Christian priesthood is a direct response to the call of Christ to follow him, to not only *do* but also to *be* as Christ. Christ’s is an *active*

*presence* in the world (a being that is a doing).<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, the conflation of being and doing has masculine connotations. This is because the sacrament of priesthood has been interpreted as ontologically reproducing the maleness of Christ. For the feminist theologian, the difficulty of the traditional priesthood does not stem from Christ's gender. Rather, as Elizabeth Johnson writes, "Jesus' maleness is construed in official androcentric theology and ecclesial practice [in a] way that results in a Christological view that effectively diminishes women" by "reinforcing a patriarchal image of God" (Johnson 2002, 152–53) and creating an ontological connection between the maleness of the historical person of Jesus and Logos as a "male offspring and disclosure of a male God" (Reuther 1993, 117).

The difficulty is not only with a tradition that excludes women from the priesthood; feminist theology more importantly critiques the limitations of a cultural imagination that cannot conceive of the divine as other than male. The old dichotomy holds true: the essence (being) of the masculine is in its ability to act (doing), whereas the feminine is passive and receptive. I suggest that this limitation of the power to conceive of God as other than male extends to the limitation of the broader cultural imaginary to conceive of authority itself as anything other than male. By another extension, I suggest that our (in)ability to conceive of performance as something beyond being, doing, and its permutations through showing and explaining, also has gendered ramifications. Rather than authority stemming from being and doing, the Womenpriests demonstrate authority that issues from knowing (wisdom) and relating.

For the feminist theologian, Christ can also be "Jesus-Sophia," Wisdom who dwells among her people (Reuther 2005; Fiorenza 2001). I propose that we consider "dwelling" as another kind of performance built on knowing and relating rather than being and doing. Neither distinctly a being nor a doing, "to dwell" is both, and more. From a theological perspective, to dwell with Wisdom made flesh in the person of Jesus is to *recognize*—not enact, not "do," but to listen and attend to—the priesthood not only of the individual called to the sacrament but also of all believers. To dwell in contemplation of the holy *is* the work of justice and community-building in this religious context, in much the same way that justice for womxn<sup>4</sup> the world over means recognizing their *already inherent* humanity, not giving them something that was already their due, or allowing them voices that were already theirs. In this way, the Womenpriests and the feminist challenge to the patriarchy of the priesthood exposes the hidden preference for the masculine that may still lurk beneath theoretical categories of performance (Bell 2002; Diamond 1996, 3–4), when the ability to perform is built upon the necessity of being and doing, and ignores or forgets other forms of performance that are not immediately or aggressively about asserting and demonstrating, but about dwelling: recognition, relating, and attending.

Schechner's discussion of "actuals" in his performance theory exemplifies such masculinist assertion. "This special way of handling experience and jumping the gaps between past and present, individual and group, inner and outer, I call 'actualizing'" (Schechner 2003, 32). An actual is a process that happens in the here and now; it is consequential, irremediable, and irrevocable; a contest where something is at stake for performers and spectators; with initiation and change in status for participants, and space is used concretely and organically (46). Jumping the gaps between participation and exclusion, the Womenpriests dwell within a community from which they are often actively excluded, even as they work to broaden the doors of the Roman Catholic community. In this regard, Schechner's "actuals" vividly describe their performance from the perspective of being and doing. However, I am interested in ways that the Womenpriests, through their work as ministers,

counsellors, and priests, perform their authority in ways that do not necessitate an ontological change, but instead, with wisdom, recognize already existent realities.

According to Roman Catholic doctrine, an ontological change occurs to the man becoming a priest during his ordination. As Cardinal John O'Connor writes, "We don't just put on vestments; we don't just receive an assignment. Neither makes us priests. We *become* priests at ordination. There is an 'ontological change' in our spiritual nature" (O'Connor 1996). This ontological change mirrors the transubstantiation of the elements during the ritual of the Eucharist as well. O'Connor continues, asking, "Is it too bold an analogy to compare the [ontological] change to Christ the Son of God's retaining His Divinity while becoming a man? Or to observe that after bread becomes the Sacred Body of Christ, it still tastes like bread and feels like bread, but is now the Body of Christ? . . . At ordination an *ontological* change takes place" (O'Connor 1996). O'Connor's continuation of ontological change through the person of the priest to the transubstantiation of the elements is significant because it illustrates how closely the male priest is understood not only to act *on behalf of* Christ but *as* Christ himself, especially by uttering Christ's own words. This is the overt conflation of being and doing that upholds the patriarchy of the traditional priesthood, and the doctrinal element with which many Womenpriests vehemently disagree, some even going so far as to call it a kind of sinful idolatry because it worships the male body as divine (Rue 2009).

For Reverend Diane Whalen, a Womanpriest ordained in 2010 and priest to Holy Wisdom Inclusive Catholic Community in Olympia, Washington, learning to broaden the doors of the meaning of priesthood meant gradually letting go of the notion of ontological change. She recounted with amusement a moment in her journey after her ordination where she spoke with a Lutheran pastor about the meaning of ordination. According to the Lutheran pastor, when they are on the job, they are pastors, and when they are not on the job, they are not. Even though Whalen does not believe in ontological change, she does not believe the Lutheran attitude describes her position either. When I asked her, "What is priesthood for you?" she responded:

For me, ordained priesthood is a gift. It's a leadership role within a community that has as its foundation a baptismal priesthood that everyone shares. Each person participates in priesthood by virtue of being part of the community. The Catholic Church teaches that priests, through their ordination, are ontologically changed, that they are in some essential way, different from the rest of humanity. I don't believe that. I can say that at my ordination, I experienced a profound, joyful shift within my whole being which has deepened ever since, but I do not believe that is due to an ontological change. I believe I am filled with such deep joy because I am able to use the gifts that I have to serve a community of people whom I love and who love me. What more could anyone ask for? It's an incredible gift! (Whalen 2017)

Priesthood as gift implies not a change in status so much as the recognition on the part of a community of the gift of spiritual leadership already present in a minister like Reverend Whalen. For a priest like Whalen, a church blossomed around her as a gift recognized simultaneously at an individual and a social level. She was not sent out from a headquarters into the world; instead, a community called her from within.

Throughout my interview with Whalen, I noted a recurring theme of allowing gradual change to come to her, rather than actively pursuing it. She noted how her first encounter with the Womenpriests challenged her sense of divine authority at the time:

D: I knew about RCWP through Women's Ordination Conference, which I had been a member of for many years. They covered the story of the first ordinations on the Danube in 2002 in the WOC newspaper. In reading the article, I thought, "Oh good for them, they think they're priests. Good for them!"

C: They *think* they're priests.

D: Yes! And I was really happy for them, but I didn't believe it.

C: What did you mean by, "They think they're priests"?

D: Probably what a lot of people have said about me. You know, you've gone through this ceremony, you think you're a priest. I know what it feels like to be called to that, to want it, and to pursue checking it out, but I couldn't believe that it was really real.

C: Forgive me because it's kind of difficult from an outsider's perspective to understand what "really real" might mean in that context.

D: Well, from a catholic, catholic, *catholic* perspective really real would mean that it was sanctioned by the institution.

C: So, without that, how can it be real?

D: Without that, how can it be real? That was my understanding in 2002. I'm no longer in that place at all. I have grown into a deeper sense that we have our own authority, individually and communally as People of God, *and*, not or, we needn't believe that the authority of the institution is greater than our own.

For Whalen, the journey toward recognition that the authority of the institution was not greater than her own or greater than the authority of a lay community paralleled her learning to accept feminine language for God as well. She spoke of recognizing the difficulty within her own thinking, where she knew on an intellectual level that using feminine language for God helped the church progress in ways with which she agreed, even though on a visceral level it was hard for her to accept: "In the early 1970s people were exploring feminine metaphors and images of God. I knew that made sense intellectually, but internally I couldn't make the switch. So, I decided to 'fake it 'til I make it' and used the words 'she' and 'her' when I referred to the Divine. That was helpful to me in broadening of my understanding of what God is." To "fake it 'til you make it" would seem the quintessential example of the conflation of being and doing; Whalen's doing (speaking feminine language for God) eventually became her being (a "broader" understanding of God). Rather than breaking a habit with the authoritative whip of devotion, Whalen allowed the language to work from the outside in, in a creative relationship with the practice of speaking itself.

Such broadening of understanding applies to the Womenpriests' relationship to the institutional Roman Catholic Church as well. From the outside, the scenario may appear as another version of David's battle with Goliath. But rather than performing her role as a lone warrior facing off with an authoritarian institution, Whalen describes the work of Womenpriests and their communities as attending to people's spiritual needs *alongside* the institution:

We are not interested in doing this with the Roman Catholic Church [*strikes knuckles of her closed fists together*], we are interested in a parallel path [*extends hands out, palms down*]. Here is another image I've used: A lot of people have jumped off the RCC institutional ship for a variety of reasons and we are a life boat. When we see people jumping off and coming over to the lifeboat, we invite them in, and ask if this is a good lifeboat for them. If it is, we invite them to be part of our community. If it's not we say, "How can we help you find the lifeboat you need?" It's about trying to

give people options so they can continue their spiritual journeys in a community in which they are nurtured and encouraged to grow. Our community has offered that to me and to many others. We would like everyone to have that opportunity and that joy.

Perhaps reflecting how the feminism that supports Womenpriests' thinking comes out of critical academic discourse, they perform a similar challenge to the authority of the Author-God that Barthes and Foucault held out for the possibilities of literary interpretation in the nascent years of poststructuralism. "To give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text" insists Barthes in *The Death of the Author*; the "authority" of signification aligns itself with the oppression of the institution (Barthes 1967, 147). The "birth of the reader" is not the birth of an individual but the recognition of a "tissue of quotations" toward and through which a text is directed; that is, a reader is an intertextual relationship, and it is that relationship that makes up what we might call a "text." For a literary scholar like Catherine Belsey, the process of interpretation is "the effect of a *relation* between a reader and a text" (Belsey 2013, 166). Meaning is never "pure intelligibility" or an ontological necessity, but a plurality. Derrida's notion of signification upholds this: we work through ever-deferred signifiers, never with actual signifieds (Derrida 1977, 40). When a Womanpriest like Whalen and communities like Holy Wisdom insist that authority comes from within a community, they perform authority in a similar way that Barthes recognizes the birth of the reader at the death of the author: as a relational presence that has been there all along, rather than meaning that has been sanctioned by a "higher" authority.

This theoretical-critical understanding of meaning-making can inform our performative interpretation of the Womenpriests' creation of a new kind of priesthood and their outreach to spiritual seekers in need of a "lifeboat." Their experience of exclusion from the institutional church affirms their recognition of authority on an individual and communal level. Naming oneself as priest is a passionate act of empowerment of both self and others. This is why naming God matters so very much; to name the divine in ways that reflect the spiritual experience of women is still a radical act. Being denied a name that one rightfully possesses, moreover, is a "loss of the experience of God" (Johnson 2002, 65). As Mary Daly notes, feminist theologians are not interested in simply sticking new female names on God, but in the affirmation of the self in a "dynamic reaching out to the mystery of God in whose being we participate" (Daly 1986, 33). This relational dynamic does not fix meaning, but rather, to use Whalen's words once more, "broadens the door" for meaning's ongoing revision and renewal.

### **Speaking of Priesthood: The Authority of Women and the Relation of the Sign**

While Whalen may understand the Womenpriests as offering "lifeboats," it is undeniable that for many women the issue of priesthood is a struggle for justice and gender equality. Does priesthood itself serve this cause? One prominent debate internal to the group is about the necessity of apostolic succession and ordination titles in a renewed church of equals. Some argue for a "discipleship of equals," where the work of ministry would be shared equally by women and men with no need for ordination, formal titles and offices—much in keeping with a historical first-century Christian model. Others believe that making women visible in the priesthood is the first step to making such equality a reality, even though it means reproducing the "hierarchy" of priesthood, even if only in name (Reuther 2010). This debate points to the primacy of the importance of valid

ordination and apostolic succession internal to the life of the Roman Catholic Church. In many ways, apostolic succession is what makes the Roman Catholic Church Roman *Catholic*, and the Womenpriests in no way want to part with their RC identity. They both debate the validity of succession while also asserting that they are in full accordance with it. According to the Vatican, the women effectively place themselves *outside* the Catholic Church by participating in the ritual of ordination. But the women receiving the holy orders understand the ritual as placing them more securely *within* the community.

According to the Womenpriests, women ordained are in the full line of succession and therefore valid as priests. This is possible in two ways: first, because the first Womenpriests were ordained by renegade male bishops, who participate in the succession and so hand it on in kind according to the intrinsic, unchangeable nature of the sacrament of ordination; second, because they have a different understanding of the tradition of succession. In May of 2008, the Vatican issued its strongest decree against the ordination of women yet, upgrading the penalty for being ordained or ordaining women to excommunication *latae sententiae*, meaning that the crime is so significant that the actor is excommunicated automatically upon the undertaking of the crime. Here is what the Womenpriests say in response, and about the validity of their ordination:

Roman Catholic Womenpriests reject the penalty of excommunication issued by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith on May 29, 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. Our movement is receiving enthusiastic responses on the local, national and international level. 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. (Response 2009)

The Womenpriests further reject the cycle perpetuated by the hierarchy of male ordination—that a person who feels called to the priesthood must submit to rigorous spiritual discernment at the hands of their male bishop, most of whom, in harmony with the Vatican, assume a theological *a priori* stance: it is not possible to ordain women to the priesthood. The discriminate speech of the Vatican targets the very *identity* of these women, both as priests and as *female* members of the church. The Womenpriests’ rejection of excommunication counters the Vatican’s attempt to punish them not only for their actions but for who they are—women.

One argument levelled against the Womenpriests is that the women complain of a discrimination that doesn’t exist. The Catholic Church affirms what Pope John Paul II called “the dignity and vocation of women” which exists between virginity and motherhood, of which the Virgin Mary is exemplary (Pope John Paul II 1988). If women would simply embrace their vocational calling as women, so the thinking goes, rather than attempting to usurp a position not *naturally* theirs, then such complaints could be eased and forgotten. This argument frames womenpriests as attempting to mark themselves with a status that limits their “dignity,” in a similar way that Western secularists may understand Muslim women choosing to wear the veil. In Saba Mahmood’s discussion of the performance of piety among women of the mosque movement within the Egyptian Islamic revival, she uses the practice of veiling to deconstruct various feminist discourses that would see this practice as either indicative of women’s oppression, or pointing to women’s grasp on power within

an oppressive system. Mahmood would like to move away from a position that contrasts women's inability to speak as subaltern subjects with women's ability to work within a system for liberation. Instead, she suggests a third way. The mosque participants treat their veils not only as *markers of or signs for* an identity that is either being oppressed or asserted, but as a *medium* for the self (Mahmood 2005, 166). The veil may mark a woman as pious, but it is also the "ineluctable means by which one trains oneself to be pious. While wearing the veil serves at first as a means to tutor oneself in the attribute of [piety], it is also simultaneously integral to the practice of [piety]" (Mahmood 2005, 158). The Womenpriests practise priesthood itself in a similar way, not as a marker of status so much as a means by which to fulfil a life calling. The Vatican frames the Womenpriests' actions as creating a problem where there is none, meaning that the Womenpriests are claiming an authority which does not belong to them. As pious Muslim women claim the veil, so do Womenpriests claim the calling of priesthood.

By creating house churches, congregations, liturgies and rituals that live out these callings, the Womenpriests prophetically speak the impossible into the present. It is impossible, the Vatican says, for the Church to ordain women. And yet, argue the Womenpriests, there are ordained women, and there have been ordained women in the church's past. As Karen Armstrong writes hopefully:

In the early church there were no priests, but prophets were extremely important and influential. Women were prophets alongside men. In an established Church it is difficult for priests to fulfill a prophetic role. After centuries of marginalization and prejudice, women are not yet insiders and could perhaps remind their brethren of the old prophetic function. It would be a fine thing if male and female priests confronted secular and ecclesiastical authorities in the spirit in which Isaiah and Jeremiah once voiced unpopular views to their kings in the name of God. (Armstrong 1993, 230)

The ossification of the institution makes women priests an impossibility for Rome but a possibility for living congregations, who often operate outside the bounds of formal Church law anyway.

So how does the Vatican respond? Another argument made for the inclusivity of women's ordination is by historical precedent. Further, according to the theological precept of *lex orandi, lex credendi*, the Church's historical practices are the surest indicators of its faith (Wijngaards 2002, 52–53). If the practice of the Church indicates its faith, then the growth and success of the Womenpriests movement is the surest argument for their cause. Instead of engaging with the practices of the wider church, the Vatican speaks itself out of direct response. The rhetorical tactic most often repeated in Rome-issued letters and decrees on the ordination of women is not one of simple denial, which would mean that there is an opposite alternative in affirmation, but a more complex stance that allows the institutional church to effectively remove itself from the argument and therefore preserve its original intentions and avoid challenge.

After the initial ordinations of the "Danube Seven," Cardinal Ratzinger's "Monitum," or warning, issued on July 10 of 2002 by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith states that

the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith wishes to recall the teaching of the Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* of Pope John Paul II, which states that "*the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful*" (n. 4). For this reason, the above-mentioned "priestly ordination" constitutes the simulation of a sacrament and is thus

invalid and null, as well as constituting a grave offense to the divine constitution of the Church. Furthermore, because the “ordaining” Bishop belongs to a schismatic community, it is also a serious attack on the unity of the Church. Such an action is an affront to the dignity of women, whose specific role in the Church and society is distinctive and irreplaceable. (Ratzinger 2002)

The basic arguments, which are outlined in the 1976 “Declaration of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: On the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood” or *Inter Insigniores*, run thus: a.) It has been the constant tradition of the Church to reserve priestly ordination for men; b.) Christ did not call any women to become part of the Twelve; c.) It is the continued practice of the apostles to pass the priesthood to men alone; d.) This attitude of Christ and the apostles must be considered a permanent, normative stance for the Church; e.) Because the priest reflects the mystery of Christ, the priest must be a man because the image of Christ can only be presented through a man (Seper 1976). The Vatican maintains that it is not that the Church is *authorized to deny* women the priesthood; rather the Church is *not authorized to grant* women the priesthood. In response to a challenge to its authority, the Vatican responds that it has no authority; it performs a seemingly passive role in order to deflect accusations of aggression. By relinquishing authority to the tradition of “the Church,” the Vatican asserts and maintains its authority, even as it remains in obedience to tradition and the precedent the Vatican understands to be historically set by Christ’s own actions.

Furthermore, the Vatican removes agency from women who seek ordination by reminding the faithful that the call to priesthood is not a right, but a service to which one is called by God. “The priestly office cannot become the goal of social advancement; no merely human progress of society or of the individual can of itself give access to it; it is of another order” (Seper 1976). These words undercut the discourse developed by the Womenpriests and feminist theologians who look back to their early Christian roots and the spirit of “ekklesia” and “diakonia” to remind themselves and their beloved Church that a life of faith must maintain itself in perpetual renewal. Writes feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza,

To understand the *ekklesia* as a discipleship of equals means to incarnate the vision and to realize the promise of the *basileia*, the commonweal, or . . . the kingdom of G\*d. It means to articulate a vision of radical equality for creating a world of justice and well-being. It means to make real the vision of justice and love which Jesus, the prophet of Divine Wisdom, has proclaimed. As the daughters and sons of Divine Wisdom, we are made in her image. We are equal. (Fiorenza 1994, 59)

Karen Armstrong looks back to the letters of Paul in the New Testament to understand again the calling of “diakonia,” with its multiple meanings of humility, ministry, and servanthood. She reminds readers that it is the women of the New Testament who understand Jesus’s radical vision of service (Armstrong 1993, 52–54). As Jesus tells his apostles:

You must not allow yourselves to be called Rabbi, since you have only one Master, and you are all brothers. . . . Nor must you allow yourselves to be called teachers, for you have only one teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you must be our servant [*diakonos*]. (Matthew 23:9-11)

While the Womenpriests attempt to remind the Church of a lost calling in “ekklesia” and “diakonia,” the Vatican characterizes this language as “mere human progress.” Through such rhetorical negations, the Vatican unspeaks the language of women attempting to speak the priesthood.

The Vatican’s exclusion of women from even the possibility of discussion is another illustration of the cultural impossibility of women signalling authority, even for themselves. This can be seen in another way that the Vatican silences women speaking priesthood: through the language of crime and punishment, with its corresponding language of repentance and forgiveness. In his *Monitum*, Ratzinger makes clear that the particular offences of the schismatic Bishop Romulo Antonio Braschi and the seven women he ordained were punished “with excommunication, reserved to the Apostolic See,” but that this very punishment was executed “expressing the hope that they might be moved to conversion.” Here, the onus is put on the person committing the crime—in effect, womenpriests *punish themselves* by wilfully denying the Church law. The Church is not dispensing punishment so much as the women and men ordaining women are disobeying the law, which dispenses its own consequences. Ratzinger continues: “It is hoped that, sustained by the grace of the Holy Spirit, they might discover the path to conversion and so return to the unity of faith and to communion with the Church, *a communion broken by their action*” (Ratzinger). The Church law, and the patriarchal Church culture that upholds it, is an established discourse that maintains its exclusionary power. It is because they are excluded from the discourse of the hierarchy by virtue of being women that the Vatican hierarchy sees women priests as anathema; it is a self-perpetuating cycle based on the incomprehensibility of female identity that lies totally beyond the realm of the knowable male order.

To be an authority is to be able to signify. The Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith’s official commentary on *Inter Insigniores* again discusses the “readability” of the priest as an image of Christ: “It would not accord with ‘natural resemblance,’ with that obvious ‘meaningfulness,’ if the memorial of the supper were to be carried out by a woman; for it is not just the recitation involving the gestures and words of Christ, but an action, and the sign is efficacious because Christ is present in the minister who consecrates the Eucharist” (Seper 1976). If a woman takes on the role of priest, her action is null and void—she becomes an empty signifier. The Vatican does not go so far as to assume women priests make heretical signs that have a heretical meaning; instead, their actions are simply empty and denied significance.

Although under the current reign of Pope Francis dialogue seems more of a possibility, the official ruling is that women are not acceptable signs of the authority of Christ’s priesthood. But perhaps even more devastatingly, the refusal to recognize the authority of women destroys the possibility of signification itself as a process of discovery and recognition. The Womenpriests’ performance of priestly authority as “dwelling-with” defies comprehension within a hierarchical dynamic that privileges authority as dogmatic control. Judith Butler speculates, “the violence of language consists in its effort to capture the ineffable and, hence, to destroy it, to seize hold of that which must remain elusive for language to operate as a living thing” (Butler 1997, 9). “Dwelling-with” approaches meaning as something made in the moment, in response to both individual and communal need; such meaning is ineffable because it is responsive, not denotative. The impossibility of women’s authority is the destruction of meaning as relational, responsive, and negotiable. This can be seen in Ratzinger’s assertion that women’s ordinations constitute “the *simulation* of a sacrament and [are] thus invalid and null, as well as constituting a grave offense to the divine constitution of the Church.” Note that a false sacrament could still have meaning *in relation to* real sacraments, whereas a “simulated” sacrament cannot. The Vatican holds that the faithful will not recognize the sacramental

nature of a woman's mass because it is simply an empty gesture—not even a perversion of a sacrament, but a simulation. The rhetorical nullification of the Vatican's role in objecting to women's priesthood extends to the woman herself, not only nullifying her speech and her actions, but also refusing to create a sustaining relationship with women and the possibilities for women's *meaning* within the Church.

### **Liturgy and the Relational Authority of the Community**

Despite the strained relationship between the Womenpriests and the Vatican, the Womenpriests' insistence on community and inclusivity can be understood as flowing out from dialogue begun during Vatican II (1962–65) under Pope John XXIII and John Paul II. Vatican II was the Church's response to its changing position in the modern world. The council addressed issues of global politics, ecumenical relations between Catholics and the non-catholic world, new and renewed liturgical and ritual practices, ecclesiology, the laity, and especially the relationship between the priest as pastor of his parish and the laity as personally involved in their community's worship experience. It was not until after Vatican II that saying mass in the vernacular, rather than Latin, became the norm, and liturgies started to reflect the interests, particular cultural practices, and talents of the community, while still following a basic format shared by all the faithful worldwide. It was also after Vatican II that women began to be seen more frequently at the altar as Eucharistic ministers and lectors, especially as young girls began to serve as acolytes and at the altar, alongside the traditional "altar boys." This was partly because Vatican II encouraged liturgical experimentation, and also as a result of interpretation of Canon 230 of the 1983 Canon Law, which addresses the lay person's role in liturgical practice, and could be read as including both males and females in any lay service, which includes service at the altar (Vatican 2017a, paragraph 2).

But the innovation and experimentation of Vatican II also need to be read alongside its grounding in tradition and its understanding of the historical church. Leonardo Boff argues that *Lumen Gentium*, the dogmatic constitution of the Church produced by the Vatican II council, "presents a confrontation between two ecclesial paradigms, that of church-society and that of church-community; there is undeniably a presence of a juridical ecclesiology alongside that of the ecclesiology of communion" (Boff 1993, 31). The church as hierarchical society and the church as community (or "People of God" in Boff's parlance) are two historical traditions within Roman Catholicism that divide the hearts and minds of the church today, and Boff's article does not mince words when he explicitly denies the possibility that both paradigms might be able to live in harmony. The section of *Lumen Gentium* on the priesthood could be read as an attempt to heal this stark divide between ordained and laity by emphasizing the interrelation between the priesthood of all the faithful as assumed by their baptism and the hierarchical priesthood:

Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ. (Pope Paul IV 1964, section 10)

Liturgy scholar Richard McCarron writes about the paradoxical position in which this "interrelation" puts the priest himself, because he is in both the foreground and the background of the performed ritual. As presider, he leads in the foreground, but being "before God" and the mystery of the sacrament, he is also in the background, servant to God and the congregation. "The chief celebrant

of any liturgy is Christ in the Spirit. All the presider says and does must be done with such depth that it leads the assembly to God through Christ in the Spirit” (McCarron 1997, 105). Although McCarron emphasizes that in worship all are “before God,” the priest’s special ontological status allows him to *be* “Christ in the Spirit” in a way that is not accessible to a layperson.

The Womenpriests’ liturgical theology contradicts *Lumen Gentium*. As priests, they are “Christ in spirit” only insofar as they represent every other in the priesthood of all believers. Only then might they represent Christ. This is an inversion of the traditional sacerdotal function of the priest, who, by virtue of the ontological change undergone through ordination, is, like Christ himself, the medium/relationship between divine and human, between ordained and lay, to the Church. In the Womenpriests’ liturgy, however, the priest is not the relationship; she merely facilitates the liturgy that expresses the relationship between a people and their God that is already theirs. A Womanpriest’s presence at the altar is the recognition of the priesthood of all.

My first encounter with the Womenpriests was in the spring of 2009 when I visited Magdala Catholic Community, a house church in Los Gatos, California, led by Juanita Cordero. There, in preparation for the Easter vigil liturgy, Cordero stood beside a simple wooden table in her home, preparing to preside over the evening mass. The table served as an altar, and like everything else, it was elegant in its simplicity—dressed in a white altar cloth, with lilies blooming at its feet. The memories are still visceral: I am in Cordero’s living room along with about thirty other people eager to welcome in the new liturgical year with silence, darkness, ceremony, and eventually candlelight and song. We’ve reached the Eucharistic portion of the liturgy, which I’ve anticipated with great curiosity. Cordero turns to Kathleen, another Roman Catholic Womanpriest, who helps her don the chasuble, a formal vestment that priests wear when saying the mass. Significantly for this particular community, Cordero has held off putting on this symbolic vestment until the time of the celebration of the Eucharist, choosing instead to remain clothed simply in the white alb that any baptized Catholic might wear while participating in a sacramental action. This emphasizes the deeply held belief, common among the Womenpriests and those who worship alongside them, that in baptism, all are priests of Christ. As Cordero explained to me later, the congregation gathered here tonight all participate in her taking on the chasuble. Her actions are their actions. They work as one people as they affirm their common calling: priesthood (Cordero 2009).

Two young children bring the bread and wine to the altar for the presentation of the gifts, threading their way through the congregants who stand next to cozy couches and kitchen chairs brought in from the other room. We all make an oblong circle around the altar. Cordero lifts her hands open and out, and we speak together words that for me are at once utterly familiar, and uncannily strange:

Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life. Blessed be God forever.

Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this wine to offer, fruit of the vine and work of human hands. It will become our spiritual drink. Blessed be God forever.

But when we come to this passage, the “presentation of the gifts,” I find my tongue tripping over itself—my brain knows these words from years of attending mass in my childhood, but my mouth does not. I suddenly realize that although I know these words intimately, I’ve never in my life

spoken them aloud, because they are reserved for the male priest in the traditional Catholic mass. But here in Magdala Community, everyone speaks them together.

Rather than speaking with a single voice while addressing her community, Cordero speaks together with Magdala Catholic Community in a plural voice. Their Easter liturgy performs this plurality by attending to the interplay between the personal and the symbolic as much as any Christian liturgy expresses the cosmological relationship between the local and the universal. The authority of symbolic action is expressed through proclamation and response on the part of this community, not only through voices in unison, but also through personal acts of participation. Lutheran liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop offers this interpretation of *koinonia*, often translated as “communion” or “participation”: “For Christians, *koinonia* within and among churches must be, at root, a liturgical phenomenon if what we primarily mean by ‘church’ is liturgical assembly. In any case, what we mean by unity is the common participation in Christ of a richly diverse body, not the ideological uniformity of a single idea, the organizational uniformity of a single institution, or even the emotional uniformity of a single feeling of ‘fellowship’” (Lathrop 1999, 121). The liturgy, the *ordo* of worship, “always carries the relationship of locality and ‘universality’ within itself. It is a washing in local waters to bring our candidates into the catholic church . . . ‘celebrated in ways appropriate to the dignity and gifts of each local place,’ for the care for that local dignity is also a universal Christian concern” (130). Lathrop’s argument is meant to apply to the common practices of Christian churches the world over, but his words fluently describe the careful way in which Magdala Catholic Community integrate not only the local with the universal but also the personal with the symbolic. Such *personal* acts of participation are the “shared things,” *koina*, which enable *koinonia*, *mutual* participation or communion.

In *The Inoperative Community*, Jean-Luc Nancy argues that communities arise by subtracting the infinite and the universal in order to expose the finite and the particular. It is in the *lack* of a sustained, over-arching, all-pervasive and embedded identity that a community comes to know itself, and that makes communication possible. A community must actively seek this lack, to rupture itself from such identity with an absolute transcendence: “The community that becomes a single thing (body, mind, fatherland, Leader . . . ) necessarily loses the *in* of being-in-common. Or, it loses the *with* or the *together* that defines it. It yields its being-together to a being *of* togetherness. The truth of community, on the contrary, resides in the retreat of such a being. Community is made of what retreats from it” (Nancy 1991, xxxix). Where Nancy writes “exposure,” I would offer “recognition.” It is not that members of Womenpriests communities expose particulars to one another so much as they recognize in their differences the mutuality of their common needs and concerns. Otherwise, the work of justice disintegrates as a common cause, and the authority of the plural voice of the community dissolves. The authority of the community is in its relationality among its members; its authority *is* its plurality, which is still composed of difference.

Earlier on that same Holy Saturday, we all stood together in anticipatory silence in Cordero’s backyard. It was a silence that was anything but empty as we watched the two womenpriests puncture the smooth whiteness of the Paschal candle with the ceremonial red pins that represent the wounds of Christ. We were out in Cordero’s backyard, where her cat twined itself around between our legs and we could smell her roses blooming and see her deceased husband’s homemade telescope sinking slowly into the grass. There was a little fire in a dilapidated brick barbecue fireplace from which the Paschal candle was eventually lit. It was an intensely personal space, and as an outsider I was highly aware of my privilege in being able to witness this community’s celebration of its most important holiday. This liturgy was so intensely personal and intimate that I hesitate to speak of it, but am

propelled by the knowledge that this very intimacy is part of this Womenpriest community's vision for renewal. We were in Juanita's *home*—her husband's ashes were in a silver urn above the fireplace. Photos of children in various stages of childhood and adolescence filled the walls. The older people in the congregation had known Juanita and her husband for years as they worked and lived together in their local Catholic community, had grieved with Juanita through her partner's death, and had celebrated the joy of her ordination. The way in which they celebrated this liturgy emphasized that they were persons in relationship to persons: they handed one another the bread and wine—fed one another, literally. After the blessing of the baptismal waters, they passed the bowl of water to one another, and, dipping their thumbs into it, traced a wet cross onto one another's foreheads, saying, "Bless you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." After the presentation of the gifts, they extended their hands and blessed the elements. Whenever the priest would have acted alone at the altar in a traditional Catholic mass, Magdala Catholic community acted together. Whenever the priest would have spoken in one authoritative voice, Magdala spoke together. And whenever the priest would have maintained a silent reverie unto himself, Magdala wrapped around itself a powerful, cohesive, communal silence.

The relational authority of the community may even take a prophetic stance. The prophetic voice, whether silenced or spoken aloud, is always plural. "Even if a prophet's word seems originary, it is always already a repetition of a divine one, a quotation with or without quotation marks" (Balfour 2002, 105). Because prophetic speech repeats the divine word, it shares in the original quality of the divine proclamation, but the original assertion of the divine is not the prophet's, only God's, and therefore other than and apart from the prophet. This means that prophetic speech brings the Other (the otherness of God, the unbridgeable distance between self and stranger, the friend, the others in one's community) into relationship within the body of the faithful. When the Womenpriests speak prophetically about the renewal of their church, they speak with a relational authority that includes not only the community of believers but also their God.

### **Liturgy and the Relational Authority of the Individual**

In the hierarchical church, only male priests can say certain prayers, touch certain objects, do certain things. One example of potent inclusivity of the Womenpriests' mass is in the doxology, which takes place at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer and precedes the "Our Father." In the common Roman Catholic mass, these words are reserved for the priest alone: "Through Him, with Him, and in Him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour are yours almighty Father, forever and ever." This is followed by the Great Amen, which is sung by the congregation in response. Dennis Smolarski in *How Not to Say Mass* is careful to note that although the congregation may feel led to join in the doxology, this should not be allowed, quoting John Paul II's 1980 letter *Inaestimabile Donum*: "'The doxology itself is reserved to the priest.' This is preceded a few sentences earlier by the statement, 'It is therefore an abuse to have some parts of the Eucharistic Prayer said by the deacon, by a lower minister or by the faithful'" (McCarron 1997, 106). The Womenpriests might question what or who is exactly being abused by the spirited participation of the faithful in a prayer.

In the Eucharistic celebrations I've attended led by Womenpriests, the entire congregation symbolically speaks their affirmation of radical equality by saying the doxology in unison, and then launches immediately into the sung Great Amen, significantly using words that reflect their inclusive and communion-oriented values:

Through Christ, with Christ and in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is Yours, O God, forever and ever.

or

Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ in union with Sophia Spirit to the honor and glory of God. (Sophia in Trinity 2009)

Traditional Roman Catholics consider this the highest point of the mass, which is gesturally marked by the priest raising the bread and wine high above his head for all in the congregation to see, a further instantiation of the priest as “Christ in the Spirit”—he who literally holds the transubstantiated elements of the body and blood of Christ. The hierarchy is embodied: the sacred flows from top to bottom—from heaven, through Christ in the elements raised above the priest’s head, through the priest himself who stands below the elements but at a raised altar, and finally out to the receptive people, who are nearest the ground. At Sophia in Trinity Catholic Community in San Francisco, led by Victoria Rue, the doxology is not so much a dramatic climax to a mass with a protagonist priest, but a shift in intention as the celebration moves from preparation of the meal to the feeding of one another.

In the celebrations I’ve attended with Sophia in Trinity Catholic Community, several details of the liturgy stand out as examples of the Womenpriests’ theology of inclusivity and equality. The small congregation sits in a circle on wooden chairs in a chapel of Trinity Episcopal Church, a parish of a different denomination that hosts this community in ecumenical partnership. After a gathering song, the Kyrie (petitions), opening prayer and readings from both the Old Testament and the Gospel, Rue opens the homily with a brief anecdote or reflection and then asks the participants how they would like to respond or what they would like to share. The shared homily can occupy a significant portion of the time spent together that morning, with community members bringing their own stories, concerns, and reflections. In my observation, the shared homily not only implements a theology that performs God as diffuse in a community of believers rather than directed through the conduit of a priest, but it also serves the practical function of introducing the congregants to one another in a personal and substantial way, so that the intimacy of preparing the table and eating with one another is a deepening of relationship within the group. The personal often becomes the spontaneous, as persons react to one another with delight and surprise. The prayers of the faithful follow the homily or could be said to open out of the homily as the stories shared flow into prayers and intentions. It is then that the preparation of the bread and wine begins.

One thing that especially caught my attention the first time I visited Sophia in Trinity was the way that Rue personally met and greeted each person who walked through the chapel doors. As the time to start mass neared, Rue would approach people with simple questions: Would you like to read the Gospel today? Would you like to take the bread to the altar? When a person acquiesced to one of these tasks, Rue proffered a handful of colourful stoles, along with the next question—Which would you like to wear? The person would draw a long piece of cloth from Rue’s hands, and she would help him or her put it on in the appropriate way (draped over the back of the neck, with the long ends dropping down the chest to hang above the knees), perhaps with a personal story about how she acquired the stole or where it came from. Several times I noticed that this was a profound experience for the person taking on the stole, or for other community members watching the interaction.

The modern stole is probably an interpretation of the long, decorated scarf that Roman officials used to connote office. In early Christian Rome, clergy members became Roman officials (McCloud

1948; Doherty 1971). But at Sophia in Trinity, the stole means something very different, especially on an emotional, visceral level, even while bringing to the symbolic fore power, authority, and leadership. One morning, Rue offered a stole to a middle-aged woman, who took it awkwardly and said, “I’ve never worn one of these before.” Rue responded by helping her put it on, saying, “We all can wear one of these. It feels good, doesn’t it?” The woman replied, “Yes!” On another morning, Rue approached a teenage girl to help with altar preparation. As Rue’s hands were full, the girl’s father stepped in and helped his daughter don the stole. The woman sitting next to me caught her breath and whispered, “I never thought I’d see such a thing—and her father helping her!” Her emotion was visible on her face. According to Rue, the wearing of the stole reminds the community that as they act together in ministering to one another in the sacraments, they all wear the priesthood of Christ (Rue 2009). This sentiment is reinforced by the symbolic placement of a stole on the altar during the liturgy of the Eucharist to signify that the altar belongs to the “People of God.”

After the introductory rites, the altar itself is carried from outside the circle to the inside, where all gather closely around it. Then, the designated “bread person” and “wine person” bring in those elements, speaking to the congregation the words of dedication the priest would speak in a traditional mass. Together, the bread and wine people say, “Pray that our offering is one that God desires.” A person fluent in the traditional mass would notice that this is in place of the congregation’s traditional response to the dedication, which is “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands, for the praise and glory of His name, for our good and the good of all His church.” In this liturgy, the “sacrifice at your [the priest’s] hands” becomes “our offering.” The bread and wine people also process the elements around the circle, and each congregant lays a hand on the pitcher of wine or extends a hand over the loaf with a blessing or intention. Furthermore, the community members serve one another, calling each other by name as they share the meal. During one Easter season celebration, everyone turned to the person on their right and left, taking hands, looking into the other’s eyes and saying, “This is my body, this is my blood.” These words intentionally blur out any hierarchical distinction between the body of Christ and the body of the church, the priesthood of the ordained minister and the priesthood of the people, the liturgical voice and the spontaneous, prophetic voice. All wait until everyone has a piece of bread before they all eat together, including the presider—there is no first or last.

These liturgical practices at Sophia in Trinity and other communities led by Womenpriests intentionally disrupt and resist what Stanley Tambiah would call the “code” of Roman Catholic ritual. The traditional and hierarchically endorsed rites of the mass create conventions for worshippers to follow, and through the repetition of convention not only within parishes but across parishes worldwide, Roman Catholics experience the strength of a global community through the ritual coding of faith practice. Tambiah reminds us that the “conventions” that rituals code, however, are not always what they purport themselves to be—he would argue that the traditional missive rites “code not intentions, but simulations of intentions” of the worshipping people (Tambiah 1985, 499). Conventionality of ritual, while bringing a community together, may also distance the subject from the enactment of ritual. “Rituals as conventionalized behavior are not designed or meant to express the intentions, emotions and states of mind of individuals in a direct, spontaneous, and ‘natural’ way. Cultural elaboration of codes consists in the distancing from such spontaneous and intentional expressions because spontaneity and intentionality are, or can be, contingent, labile, circumstantial, even incoherent or disordered” (Tambiah 1985, 499). At Sophia in Trinity, however, I have witnessed ways in which the code of ritual can bring together convention and intention, spontaneity and tradition. Through their “imitation” of Christ and recuperation of first-century inclusive “ekklesia,” they work to blend tradition and the stability of what Tambiah calls “simulated”

intentions with active and spontaneous worship. The Womenpriests do not consider themselves a schismatic group. Even though their liturgies may sometimes differ greatly from the local Catholic parish's traditional understanding of the mass, they build upon an ancient and living tradition in their rituals of renewal. Part of that tradition is adaptation to local culture and need, a notion that, as noted above, the second Vatican council did much to reinvigorate.

At Sophia in Trinity, the Prayers of the Faithful usually take place after the homily and before the preparation of the Eucharist in a traditional mass. Usually, a designated lector will read these petitions, and the congregation will respond in unison, "Lord, hear our prayer." Congregants offer praise, thanksgivings, or petitions to the group, who respond silently with a series of gestures offered by Rue. While the petitioner is speaking, all cup their hands in a bowl shape above their laps. When the prayer is done, all bring their cupped hands to their hearts, then open their arms up and out "to the universe," bring hands back to heart once more, then back to rest above the lap in the receptive bowl position, waiting for the next speaker. The gesture is repeated after the next prayer. This is an embodied response to the intimacy of praying aloud within a group, and as I performed the gestures along with the congregants, I found myself noticing the whisper of clothing on moving bodies, the way opening the arms encouraged a deep breath, and the different kind of awareness that moving in unison brings to a group. This gestural response is not any less codified than the traditional "Lord, hear our prayer," but the way Sophia in Trinity treats this process as mutable and adaptable, even (or especially) in the moment of worship, responds to the intentions of the people present. On one morning during the homily, a woman shared a moving story about witnessing another woman who had stood up against church authority. This woman had approached a bishop, planted her feet firmly, extended a straight arm with palm out, and said, "This is not our Church." The woman telling the story demonstrated the strong gesture. As we moved into the prayers of the faithful, Rue suggested that we adapt this gesture as a response in place of the bowl-hands gesture. We did so, creating a new rhythm and a new intention for this portion of the mass.

That spontaneous gesture following the prayers of the faithful became for the people gathered that morning a religious symbol, even though it had never been used this way before. As Talal Asad writes, religious symbols "cannot be understood independently of their historical relations with non-religious symbols or of their articulations in and of social life, in which work and power are crucial" (Asad 1993, 53). Indeed, this spontaneous gestural response became religious *because* it articulated a critical understanding of the People of God in relationship to hierarchical power. This is a perfect example of another aspect of Asad's ritual theory, which is that rituals are manners of speaking and acting through which faith is actively played out. He is careful to emphasize that rituals are not stimuli which provoke faithful responses, but performative processes that actively construct faith. In *Genealogies of Religion*, Asad confronts well-known anthropologist Clifford Geertz on this issue, because Geertz maintains that rituals are where "the moods and motivations which sacred symbols induce in men and the general conceptions of the order of existence which they formulate for men meet and reinforce one another" (Geertz 1973, 112). For Geertz, a sacred symbol and its meaning pre-exist the ritual, where for Asad, sacred symbols and their meanings are processually created through ritual, and these symbols and what they represent are fluid, responding to culture and context.

In a similar manner that the community, as plural, is its own authority, I further assert that the individuality of each faithful participant, responding out of their own individual need and concern, is also essential to the performance of relational authority. As the members of Sophia in Trinity drape their own and others' shoulders in the stoles of divine presence, as the members of Magdala

Catholic Community deepen their interpersonal connection with each tracing of the holy-water cross, as individual priests like Whalen, Cordero, and Rue express their unique callings to the priesthood through facilitation and leadership of likewise unique communities, the Womenpriests, as a movement, perform the authority not only of the people of God, but also of the individual response to the divine call. Both kinds of authority, personal and communal, are relational; they do not hold themselves to traditional dichotomies splitting priest from layperson, holy from mundane, or even divine from human. Their authority lies in recognizing the already authoritative voice of the individual believer in response to the call to a life of holiness, the already divine nature of the everyday, and the already human nature of the divine.

## Conclusion

To be an authority is to be able to signify on the part of the individual. To be able to signify is to be granted authority by the community. The example of the Womenpriests deserves the attention not only of the religious world but also of culture at large if we are to recognize the already inherent worth and humanity of womxn not only as signifiers of authority, but *already* authorities in our own right. I have argued that the performance of relational authority of the Womenpriests within and alongside the Roman Catholic Church serves as a microcosm in which we can witness performance as “dwelling with,” in a paradigm that both challenges and opens up the understanding of performance as elaborations of being, doing, showing, and explaining. To consider “dwelling with” as performance invites knowing and recognizing as pivots around which communities and individuals signify to one another, drawing from a feminist understanding of God (and even Christ *herself*) as Wisdom/Sophia. Feminist theology has sometimes been wary of the mystical side of the Wisdom tradition in Christianity because it often speaks of the dissolution and abnegation of the self in order to achieve unity with God, and this smacks too painfully of the ways in which women have, historically, been subjugated to self-denial and sublimation through the labour of caring for others in order to be allowed marginal positions in society (Lanzetta 2005). Wisdom has also been violent in the Christian imaginary; in a feminist re-telling of the story of King Solomon’s “wise” ruling over the two nameless women who claim the same child, “the King resolves the dispute by silencing the women, raising violent hands above the child and finally revealing the ‘true mother’ as the one who, out of love, renounces her own rights to justice” (Walton 2001, 3). However, images of the feminine divine have survived through spirit (*ruah*), indwelling (*shekina*) and wisdom (*hokmah/sophia*). In fact, one explanation for Christian theology’s forgetting of the feminine aspect of Spirit (as a component of the Trinity and elsewhere) is that it is because it was allied so closely with the roles and persons of actual women marginalized in church and society (Johnson 1997, 128–31). To claim feminine imagery of the divine demands a corresponding claim for authority based on knowledge through spirit, indwelling, and wisdom.

From a feminist-Wisdom point of view, meaning-making is the search for deeper understanding and insight into the self and the world in order to clearly see structures of power and the work to be done in service to justice for all. For example, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza proposes a different approach to biblical hermeneutics, one that does away with the dualistic model that begins with interpretation and then proceeds, in appropriative fashion, to application. She offers instead interpretation as emancipation: “Becoming a feminist interpreter means shifting your focus from biblical interpretation construed as an ever better explanation of the text to biblical interpretation as a tool for becoming conscious of structures of domination and for articulating visions of radical democracy that are inscribed in our own experience as well as in that of texts” (Fiorenza 2001, 9).

Interpretation as consciousness-raising does not necessitate hierarchical structures of experts, authors, or performers “showing-doing,” but invites empathic widening of awareness. Such communication privileges listening over demonstrating; understanding is not an act of appropriation but an entrance into solidarity, or dwelling-with.

In another part of our interview, Reverend Whalen reflected that responding to others in community as well as answering the call to priesthood was about “claiming our authority” (Whalen 2017). Elizabeth Johnson similarly reflects, “As women name themselves in power, responsibility, freedom, and mutual relatedness . . . new ownership of the gift of the female self as *imago Dei, imago Christi* is transacted” (Johnson 1997, 75). In this transaction that is also a claim, the woman as an authoritative representation of God and Christ returns authority to God. Such an economy of power is also the exchange of a gift, and the mutual recognition of value and worth. When members of Magdala Catholic Community bless or feed one another, they do not simply “do” a ritual action, nor do they “show” one another what they are doing in order to demonstrate its significance. They attend and respond to one another. When Sophia in Trinity members offer personal reflections during their homily or dress one another in their colourful stoles, they need not appropriate meaning before applying it; through their liturgies, they simultaneously give and receive. Performances like these are their own authority by power of the interrelatedness of intention and reception, attention and response. “Dwelling with” recognizes forms of performance that work beyond the confines of representational “being/doing/showing,” and that signify not through the conflation of being and doing, but through such relational authority.

## Notes

1. Women in ordained ministry have a complex history. Rites of ordination, inscriptions, and artwork yield evidence that the Church gave women ordained deaconate status up until the ninth century (Wijngaards 2002). In 1970, Ludmila Javorova was ordained in an underground Roman Catholic Church during Communist rule in Czechoslovakia in order to keep the church alive during a time of persecution (Winter 2001). The “irregular” ordination of eleven women as Episcopal priests in 1974 also served as a catalyst for women working within the Roman Catholic Church. In 2004, the Orthodox Greek Church adopted the ordination of women deacons, citing historical, literary, and biblical evidence.
2. I am grateful for an e-mail conversation with Joy Palacios which pushed me to reconsider basic performance theory.
3. “Provided the sign is an effect of God the dispenser of grace, it is true to say: this grace is conferred here and now because embodied, and by taking concrete form, in the sacramental manifestation” (Rahner 1963, 40).
4. This term has grown in recent use and popularity. Like “womyn,” “womxn” also avoids classifying women as dependent on men, but further extends the term to include all those who identify as women. Some feminists may prefer “womxn” to “womyn” because the “x” is seen as trans-inclusive, and “womyn” may have transphobic connotations in some circles.

## References

- Armstrong, Karen. 1993. *The End of Silence: Women and the Priesthood*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. New York: John Hopkins University Press.
- Balfour, Ian. 2002. *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Barthes, Roland. 1977. *Image Music Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana Press.
- Bell, Elizabeth. 2002. "When Half the World's a Stage: A Feminist Excavation of Richard Schechner's Theory of 'Actuals'." *Theatre Annual* 55: 112–31.
- Belsey, Catherine. 2013. "Textual Analysis as a Research Method." In *Research Methods for English Studies*, edited by Gabrielle Griffin, 157–74. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Bishop, Claire. 2006. "Introduction: Viewers as Producers." In *Participation*, edited by Claire Bishop, 10–17. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Blanchot, Maurice. (1959). 2003. "Prophetic Speech." In *The Book to Come*, translated by Charlotte Mandell, 79–85. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Boff, Leonardo. 1993. "The Uncompleted Vision of Vatican II: The Church—Hierarchy or People of God?" *The Non-ordination of Women and the Politics of Power*, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Hermann Häring, 31–39. London: SCM Press.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas. (1998) 2006. "Relational Aesthetics." In *Participation*, edited by Claire Bishop, 160–71. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1997. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. London: Routledge.
- Byrne, Julie. 2016. *The Other Catholics: Remaking America's Largest Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Daly, Mary. 1986. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. London: Women's Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- de Saussure, Ferdinand. 1959. *Course in General Linguistics*. Translated by Wade Baskin. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1977. *Limited, Inc.* Translated by Samuel Weber. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Diamond, Elin. 1996. "Introduction." In *Performance and Cultural Politics*, edited by Elin Diamond, 1–14. New York: Routledge.
- Doherty, John T. 1971. "Ecclesiastical Vestments in the Modern Church." *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 29 (7): 310–12.
- Fiorenza, Elizabeth Schüssler. 1994. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad Publishing.
- Fiorenza, Elizabeth Schüssler. 1999. "The Emperor Has No Clothes: Democratic Ekklesial Self-Understanding and Kyriocratic Roman Authority" in *The Non-ordination of Women and the Politics of Power*, edited by Fiorenza and Hermann Häring, 58–66. London: Concillium.
- . 2001. *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*. New York: Orbis.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Culture*. New York: Basic Books.
- Goodstein, Laurie. 2016. "Pope Francis Says Ban on Female Priests Is Likely to Endure." *New York Times*, November 1. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/02/world/europe/pope-francis-women-priests.html>.
- Heyward, Carter. 1976. *A Priest Forever*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Johnson, Elizabeth. 2002. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. New York: Crossroad Publishing.
- Kaprow, Allan. (1966) 2006. "Notes on the Elimination of the Audience." In *Participation*, edited by Claire Bishop, 102–4. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Lanzetta, Beverly. 2005. "Via Feminina and the Un-saying of 'Woman'." In *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology*, 7–26. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press.
- Lathrop, Gordon W. 1999. *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

- Levada, William Cardinal. 2008. "Regarding the Crime of Attempting Sacred Ordination of Women." *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, May 30. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20071219\\_attentata-ord-donna\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20071219_attentata-ord-donna_en.html).
- Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- McCarron, Richard. 1997. *The Eucharistic Prayer at Sunday Mass*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications.
- McCloud, Henry Joseph. 1948. *Clerical Dress and Insignia of the Roman Catholic Church*. Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. 1991. *The Inoperative Community*. Translated by Peter Connor et al. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- O'Connor, Cardinal John. 1996. "The Necessity of Continuing Formation for the Priest." [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc\\_con\\_cclergy\\_doc\\_18061996\\_intr\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc_con_cclergy_doc_18061996_intr_en.html).
- Patrick, Anne E. 2013. "Women and Church Authority: A Map of Responses to Injustice." In *Conscience and Calling: Ethical Reflections on Catholic Women's Church Vocations*, 51–84. London: Bloomsbury.
- Plummer, John P. 2006. *The Many Paths of the Independent Sacramental Movement*. Berkeley: Apocryphile Press.
- Pope John Paul II. 1988. "Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year." *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, August 15. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1988/documents/hf\\_jpii\\_apl\\_19880815\\_mulieris-dignitatem.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jpii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html).
- Rahner, Karl. 1963. *The Church and the Sacraments*. Translated by W. J. O'Hara. Freiburg: Herder and Herder.
- Ratzinger, Cardinal Joseph. 2002. "Monitum: Regarding the Attempted Priestly Ordination of Some Catholic Women," July 10. *Rome's Main Documents on the Ordination of Women*. [http://www.womenpriests.org/church/rome\\_wom.asp](http://www.womenpriests.org/church/rome_wom.asp).
- "Response Regarding Excommunication Decree." 2016. *Roman Catholic Women Priests—North America*. <http://www.romancatholicwomenpriests.org/faq.htm>.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. 1993. *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- . 2005. "The Spiritual Feminine in New Testament and Patristic Christianity." *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 2010. "Women Priests Offer Differing Approaches to Valid Ordination." *National Catholic Reporter*, August 10. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/women-religious/women-priests-offer-differing-approaches-valid-ordination>.
- Rue, Victoria. 2008. "Crossroads: Women Priests in the Roman Catholic Church." *Feminist Theology* 17 (1): 11–20.
- . 2009. Personal interview. June 27.
- Schechner, Richard. 2003. *Performance Theory*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2013. "What is 'To Perform'?" *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 28. New York: Routledge.
- Seper, Cardinal Franjo. 1976. "Inter Insigniores: On the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood." *Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith*, October 15. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19761015\\_inter-insigniores\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html).

- Sophia in Trinity. 2009. Unpublished Orders of Worship Distributed for Celebrants with Sophia in Trinity Inclusive Eucharistic Celebration, April 25 and June 20. San Francisco, California.
- Tambiah, Stanley. 1985. *Culture, Thought, and Social Action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vatican. 2017a. "Canon 230." *Code of Canon Law*. Book II, Part I, Title II, "The Obligations and Rights of the Lay Christian Faithful."  
[http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/\\_PV.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_PV.HTM).
- Vatican. 2017b. "Canon 1024." *Code of Canon Law*. Book IV, Part I, Title VI, Chapter II, "Those to Be Ordained." [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/\\_P3P.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_P3P.HTM).
- Walton, Heather. 2001. "The Wisdom of Sheba: Constructing Feminist Practical Theology." *Contact* 135: 3–12.
- Whalen, Diane. 2017. Personal interview. January 27. Olympia, WA, USA.
- "When Will There Be Enough Women on the Supreme Court? Justice Ginsberg Answers That Question." 2015. *PBS Newshour*, February 5. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/will-enough-women-supreme-court-justice-ginsburg-answers-question/>.
- Wijngaards, John. 2002. *No Women in Holy Orders? Women Deacons of the Early Church*. Norwich: Canterbury Press.
- Winter, Miriam Therese. 2001. *Out of the Depths: The Story of Ludmila Javorova, Ordained Roman Catholic Priest*. New York: Crossroad Publishing.