

Women's Ministry: A Hidden Opening for
Ecumenical Discussion

Susan A. Ross
Loyola University Chicago
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The issue of the ordination of women continues to be one that divides Christian communities and thus may at first seem to be an unlikely topic for a conversation about furthering ecumenical discussions. On the one hand, Roman Catholicism has ruled out the ordination of women largely on account of two reasons: one is the “permanent value” of the actions of Jesus and the early church in choosing only men for public ministry;¹ the second is the symbolic character of the priesthood and its relationship to God, the church, and humanity.² Particularly for the “high” sacramental traditions, which would include those Anglicans opposed to women's ordination, the male-only priesthood maintains a continuous line of apostolic succession from the ancient church to the present. The ordination of women represents, at least for some, a concession to contemporary sensibilities and a radical change that lacks support from the tradition. I would add an additional comment here that the ordination of openly gay and lesbian ministers is a closely related issue, touching on some of the same questions, but one that I will not deal with here in any detail.

For those traditions that do ordain women, the issue is primarily one of justice. In the contemporary world, barring women from ordained ecclesial leadership on the basis of their subordinate status or, more likely in recent years, women's unique or special nature, suggests a kind of “separate but equal” mentality that experience shows is nearly always unjust. In most Protestant mainline traditions, the ordination of women represents a step forward from the times when women were admonished to keep silence in the churches and when women's main tasks

seemed to be to care for children and to maintain a clean church, if they were not so fortunate as to be a minister's wife.

Of course the issue of the ordination of women is a complex one and I have done little justice to the various arguments that have been brought forward by those who advocate for women's ordination on the basis of justice and those who argue that it is God's will that women have their own unique gifts to give to the church that do not include ordained ministry. Just for the record, I, as a Roman Catholic, find my own tradition's arguments against women's ordination to be faulty; at worst, they suggest that men more fully image God than women do and thus are idolatrous; at best, they suggest that women's so-called unique vocation has yet to be fully appreciated by the hierarchy -- which, it must be said, has taken virtually no steps at all to draw fully on these unique gifts that are so celebrated.

My task here then is less a strictly theological than a practical one. There are, no doubt, major doctrinal issues involved in the theological anthropology that underlies Roman Catholic and Orthodox positions, but I am not going to rehearse them here, except as they are helpful to the points that I hope to make. **Rather, I want to suggest that women involved in lay and ordained ministry can learn from each other in ways that can potentially transform the practice of ministry and that can also serve ecumenical purposes on a grass-roots level.** In other words, this experience is both practically helpful but also has potential theological value. Such conversations might also dispel misinformation about the life and practice of ministry.

Formal ecumenical discussions have largely been fostered at the levels of appointed church commissions, and many of you may serve on some of these commissions. Over the years, the many documents that have resulted from these commissions have paved the way to greater and more open relationships among the Christian Churches. I think, for example, of the

agreements between the Episcopal and Lutheran Churches on the matter of shared communion, etc. But on the grass-roots level, it seems that we have not moved much further than the joint prayer services and shared meals that began in the years following Vatican II in the heady first days of hopes for union among the Christian churches. This, of course, is one of the reasons for this conference. I think more can be done on the grass-roots level, particularly with the work of women in various ministries.

My suggestions here are drawn from my own experience of and research on the ministries of women in the Catholic Church as well as my experiences with ordained women in Protestant traditions.³ Too little dialogue has gone on among women in ministry in the different Christian traditions, and yet they are a rich source for ways to consider moving forward discussions of the nature of ministry itself and the ways that various churches envision their ministries. I want to begin by considering the work that is done by Roman Catholic women and then I will turn to women of other Christian traditions.

I. Roman Catholic women in ministry

The popular image of women in the Catholic Church in the U.S. can be rather misleading if one is uninformed: one might easily come to the conclusion that women's leadership is discouraged by the hierarchy, or that women's inability to be ordained relegates them to purely subservient positions: teaching small children or laundering the altar linens. Yet the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' own study reveals some interesting statistics: women hold 48.4% of the positions in U.S. diocesan leadership, and 26.8% of the top-level leadership positions (e.g., chiefs of pastoral services, finance, personnel, and education) are held by women.⁴ The National Pastoral Life Center estimates that women constitute 80% of Catholic

church employees. Websites such as Future Church (www.futurechurch.org) maintain resources for women in lay ecclesial ministry (the preferred term). In fact, there are more women ministers in the U.S. Church today than there are diocesan priests. While organizations such as Roman Catholic Women Priests (www.romancatholicwomenpriests.org) grab many of the headlines these days, most women who work in various ministerial capacities in the U.S. Catholic Church remain more or less faithful members of their parishes. And while I will not elaborate on this point further, the fact that women are not ordained in Roman Catholicism has led many women to vocations as theologians, which most consider to be an important form of ministry as well.

Over the last twenty or so years, women have begun to be appointed as “Pastoral Administrators” in a number of U.S. dioceses. Depending on the decision of the local bishop, a pastoral administrator may be appointed to a parish to care for all the needs of the parish except for the administration of the sacraments (ergo the term “sacramental minister,” which distinguishes a priest from the person who actually runs the parish). In her important study *They Call Her Pastor*, Sociologist of Religion Ruth Wallace studied a group of women pastoral administrators from around the U.S. and found that for many of their parishioners, the presence of a woman pastor constituted a kind of “new normal.”⁵ In a few cases, Wallace found that parish members made few if any distinctions between the powers of the visiting priest and the pastoral administrator, with some commenting, “Father X’s Mass is fine, but I really prefer Sister’s Mass.”

Although some dioceses have cut back or eliminated pastoral administration positions for lay people (including the archdiocese of Chicago which had a number of women in these positions when I researched this topic over ten years ago but no longer makes these appointments), there is no question that a large number of women Pastoral Associates currently

staff many parishes in U.S. dioceses. With the so-called shortage of priests, pastoral associates take on a number of important responsibilities in running a parish: counseling, financial management, liturgical preparation, and religious education, to name only the most obvious ones. The overwhelming majority of pastoral administrators in the U.S. are women, mostly lay women, with a number of religious sisters also taking on this position. In addition to these roles, women also work as Religious Education coordinators, music ministers, parish secretaries, etc.

Clearly, then, Roman Catholic women are highly active in ministerial positions and constitute a majority of parish and diocesan employees. Without the active presence of women – and in these cases, I am referring to paid employment, not volunteer positions – it is hard to imagine how parish life would continue.

Yet for many if not most of these women, the positions they are in are considered to be a sort of “last resort” for the official church, in the same way that women are “extraordinary ministers” of the Word or the Eucharist; that is, when it comes to being a reader or distributing the Eucharist, they do this only because there are insufficient numbers of priests available. In addition, many women in these positions complain that they do not receive the respect or support they would like from the dioceses in which they are employed. In a conversation I had with a woman pastoral administrator some years ago, this highly educated African-American woman commented that her lack of a real title meant that she was always a second-class citizen at meetings with priests. And the lack of job security is a further issue; it is not uncommon for a pastoral associate to be summarily fired when a new pastor is assigned to a parish.

Yet the vast experience of these women – remember, they are 80% of the employees of the Catholic Church in the U.S.! – are rarely if ever taken into consideration in ecumenical discussions. Nor are there, as far as I am aware, organizations that draw on their wisdom in

relationship to the theology of ministry. Moreover, it is well-known in the U.S., and I am sure elsewhere, that many of the women whose husbands are in deacon-formation programs are far more talented and educated than their husbands; I have taught in a number of these courses and can testify to this point. So it is not only women in “official” positions but also the large numbers of women who are in supportive positions that are often overlooked.

My own research over ten years ago suggested that there are particular gifts that women in ministry provide to the church. The first is a broadening of the nature of sacramentality. While official church documents make an extraordinary effort to draw sharp distinctions between what women can do in their various capacities of preparing people for the sacraments and what ordained clergy do – one document, for example, makes the point that only clergy can “dispense” the sacraments⁶ – many of the women involved in various forms of ministry are able to provide a ritual dimension to many otherwise unritualized practices, and to extend a sense of sacramentality to a wider range.

Another theme is the importance of hospitality, a point also mentioned by Ruth Wallace in her study. Many women find that their positions offer them an opportunity to welcome members of a parish, to personalize their pastoral presence for the parishioners, especially in contexts where the sacramental minister may have multiple parishes for which he is responsible. This sense of hospitality helped to increase a sense of community among parishioners; it is sometimes remarked that women are more socialized to offer such forms of hospitality than clergy are, in the sense that caring for relationships is a kind of “women’s work,” and in present-day conditions, the clergy are often so strapped for time with their sacramental duties that such efforts may be impossible.

Yet another theme is the continued significance of the Eucharist, despite much poor presiding and preaching. It is true that many women have found sustenance in women-led rituals that celebrate various events in personal, community, and family life. These rituals have drawn on women's creativity as ritual planners and leaders and have revealed much otherwise hidden talents.⁷ Yet the Eucharist maintains its centrality, as the movement of Roman Catholic Women Priests witnesses. In my own experience of women's ritual groups, the effort of having to come up with new ritual ideas every time a liturgical gathering is planned gets to be exhausting; being able to rely on familiar rituals is both central to ritual experience and also maintains a connection with one's tradition.

Finally, the continued presence of ambiguity in our sacramental life is simply a fact to be accepted. No one parish, pastor, liturgy, sacramental experience, is perfect. Living with the contradictions of the church is an everyday experience and acknowledging this ambiguity is also acknowledging the complexity of human life. As I noted in my book, "This acceptance of ambiguity is not a despairing one, but one that includes much humor and an acknowledgment of their reliance on others. These women frequently commented on the lack of a sense of ambiguity on the part of those clergy with whom they had worked unsuccessfully" (218).

In sum, then, women are highly active in ministry in Roman Catholicism, although their activities in relation to the sacraments are highly circumscribed by the hierarchy. Nevertheless, women are making a strong impact on the practice of ministry.

Let me turn now to the experiences of Protestant women clergy.

II. Protestant Women Clergy

The title of a now ten-year-old study of Protestant women clergy sums up the struggles of many clergy women: *Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling*.⁸ This helpful and informative study

looks at the experiences of ordained women based on surveys of 5,000 women and men from sixteen Protestant denominations in 1993-94, ranging from the large mainline traditions to small Holiness churches.⁹ While Protestant women have been able to go through seminary and become ordained clergy, take on positions of leadership in churches and in denominational leadership, many obstacles remain.

The first observation that the authors of this study make is the complexity of the life of ordained women ministers.¹⁰ Theirs is a very different life than the traditional married male pastor, for whom there has always been precedent and example. The issues they face include maintaining boundaries between personal and professional lives, negotiating marital relationships, dealing with children, and the pressures of managing finances. One of the observations made by many clergy women was the sense that they were constantly under the critical eyes of their congregations. Yet the authors conclude that overall, clergy women are “doing rather well in managing their complex lives.”¹¹

Second, clergy women continue to experience obstacles in their career paths. Denominations still persist in appointing or calling more men than women to senior pastor positions. For those clergy women who do succeed in attaining a senior ministry position, there are often many stresses. As the authors of this study note, “Placement discrimination, salary inequities, and dead-end careers indicate that problems persist.”¹² In addition, there is a sense among younger clergy men and women – that is, those ordained in the 1990’s rather than those ordained in the 1970’s and 1980’s – that gender discrimination is no longer an issue. This means that some of the women clergy find themselves in situations where they may tend to blame themselves for difficulties in their situations, when in fact, the problem may be more related to gender discrimination.

Third, women are more likely than men to take on less traditional clerical occupations or to leave parish ministry. Many work in hospital chaplaincy, college and university chaplaincy, or with their denominational offices.

Yet the numbers of women in Protestant clergy continue to grow. While still an overall minority, women are attending seminary and becoming ordained at increasing rates. It is no longer a surprise to encounter a woman clergy member, and women are now taking on more and more leadership positions in denominational structures, becoming bishops and presidents, although not without problems.

III. Possibilities for Dialogue

At first, it may appear that the situations of Catholic and Protestant women are very different. Catholic women in ministry, for the most part, do not experience the same expectations from their parishioners as do Protestant women pastors. Catholic women always serve under some form of male clerical authority, and thus do not experience the same issues regarding leadership as do many Protestant women clergy.

In addition, most Catholic women in ministry do not have the same experiences of seminary formation as do Protestant women clergy; that is, while Catholic women may hold advanced degrees, their educational experiences may be very diverse – i.e., degrees in Religious Education, Pastoral Counseling, etc. Catholic women do attend some seminaries and some receive the standard M.Div. degree, but the experience of attending seminary with a cohort of colleagues anticipating ordination is often more a source of stress than of collegiality. Moreover, given pressure from the hierarchy, fewer Catholic women are given opportunities to preach in their congregations. Here, I would cite my own experience, where our Pastoral Associate used to preach at least four times a year, and now does not preach at all at Sunday liturgies, largely

because of pressure from the archbishop. This is only to begin to list some of the major differences on the experiences of Catholic and Protestant women.

I want to focus on three issues that may help to open up ecumenical discussions among Catholic and Protestant women engaged in active ministry: the nature of vocation, preaching, and leadership. All of these issues relate to ministry and potentially to ordination, and there are ways that the experiences and practices of these three issues may open up potential avenues to greater ecumenical cooperation. I want to stress here that most of my experience as a Roman Catholic married woman and theologian necessarily shapes much of what I have to say.

First is the nature of vocation. For Roman Catholic women, the idea of a “vocation to the priesthood” is one of the contested issues – that is, do Catholic women have such vocations? Those Catholic women who feel called to the priesthood argue that their call is frustrated and blocked by the official position of the church. Yet it is worth asking the question how the actual practice of ministry and the ability to live out one’s call are connected. My suggestion is that it might be very helpful for Protestant and Catholic women in ministry to have conversations about the nature of vocation and how ordination affects the way that one’s vocation can be lived out. One of the main issues that has emerged from the movement for women’s ordination, at least in Roman Catholic circles, is that what is asked for is not “add women and stir.” That is, the priesthood or ministry that women envision is not the traditional celibate, clerical lifestyle but rather a transformed ministry of service.

As with any contested issue, dreams and reality may not always be easily correlated. Given the tensions and difficulties associated with actual clerical leadership, .how can women learn together about what pastoral life actually involves, what the significance of ritual leadership is, and how it is experienced on the outside and the inside? My own sense is that the

temptations of clericalism do not simply vanish when the collar-wearer is a woman (that is, what Catholics may learn from ordained women) and that a lot of real ministry is done by the non-ordained (what ordained women may learn from Catholic women).

There is, in fact, a great deal of literature in the Catholic tradition on the nature of lay ministry. Yet much official language still focuses on the “shortage of vocations.” While my own concerns are for gender justice in ministry, focusing solely on women’s access to the ordained priesthood may overlook some of what Sandra Schneiders used to refer to as the “flip side” of gender discrimination in the Catholic tradition.¹³ That is, ministry itself has been transformed by this growth of a sense of vocation among the laity. Of course, a great deal of credit ought to go to Luther’s revival of the priesthood of all believers and the way that marriage or single life can constitute vocations of their own.

A second issue is preaching. This is also a very sore issue for many women in the Catholic tradition who feel that their gifts are going unused and therefore unappreciated, and many congregations as a result are deprived of the wisdom and insights of women at the lectern. For Catholics, preaching has been so linked – and continues to be – with priestly ordination that not only the hierarchy but also some congregations are highly resistant to the practice. Despite the very poor quality of many Catholic sermons and, I would add, the astonishingly low expectations on the part of many Catholic parishioners, occasional lay preaching has opened up some very powerful possibilities. A few months ago, my own university-based parish found itself in the position of having a full church present for the 9:30 a.m. Sunday liturgy but no priest-presider. The pastor and some of the staff were away at a retreat, and the substitute priest did not respond to telephone calls. There was obviously some miscommunication. So the director of liturgy explained the situation to the congregation and said that the remaining staff would

have a liturgical celebration in the absence of a priest. If any member of the congregation felt that they wanted to leave so as to be able to attend Mass elsewhere, that would be completely understandable. No one left. The sermon that was preached by the young woman pastoral associate was one of the finest that I had heard in months, and as my husband and I were leaving the pews, a man behind me said, "If this is the church of the future, I like it!" I have yet to hear more preaching from this gifted minister. Yet alongside this, I could put my experience a few months later of being in a music group that was invited to play at a Lutheran church. The young woman pastor's sermon was adequate but dull, and did not measure up to the very fine sermons I had heard from other Lutheran women during my days as a pilgrim at a Lutheran church. My point is, of course, that no one tradition has a lock on good preaching, but that given the opportunity, Catholic women can offer many gifts to the church.

Here I would like to make a couple of suggestions. One is that Catholic churches invite clergy from other denominations to visit occasionally and to allow congregations to experience preaching from other traditions. Protestant churches can also invite Catholic women to preach at Protestant churches. There can be many benefits to these visits. My own experience of attending a graduate school whose history was Protestant was eye- and ear-opening, as for the first time in my life, I heard well-prepared and powerfully presented sermons, nearly all of them from Protestant faculty or students. Catholics tend to have such low expectations of sermons, mostly in terms of time but also in relation to content, that some ecumenical education would be very helpful. But preaching is often both under- and over-rated. On the one hand, the challenges of week in and week out sermon preparation are probably little understood by many, and on the other hand, the actual effects of sermons may be overrated – as I often tell my graduate students in their first teaching experiences, their students put far less store into each individual class than

they do. For the experiences of women, such attention to preaching can help open up the gifts that women can give to their communities. But these experiences can open up ecumenical discussion on the significance of preaching in one's community.

The third point I want to bring up is that of leadership. This is another painful issue for Catholic women since liturgical leadership is often seen as the only kind of leadership that really counts. But in fact, Catholic laypeople, and especially women, are very much involved in many different dimensions of leadership, as the statistics I mentioned at the beginning of this paper indicate. The fact that Catholic women are not being ordained has ironically resulted in – or, in Sandra Schneiders' terms, offered another “flip side” to -- a multiplicity of ministries among Catholic laypeople. At my parish church and in the campus ministry of my university, lay ministers organize volunteer opportunities, immersion trips, liturgical music, prayer and bible study groups. At my parish, nearly all of the non-ordained leaders are women.

I lack the experience of being involved in a Protestant church congregation within the last 15 years. But when I was a sojourner for a few years at a Lutheran church in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I was involved in many dimensions of the church community: a member of the liturgical committee and the choir, an occasional assisting minister, and I made a financial pledge to the church. There were many laypeople involved in the community and they gave of their time generously. But what I didn't witness there, and what I do witness in my present Catholic community, is the number of paid laypeople, especially women, who see their work as a form of ministry and not simply as volunteering their time for the church. I find it interesting that the hierarchical Roman Catholic church has ended up with such a variety of ministries in which women play such a predominant role, in large part because the priesthood is closed to women.

I do not want to be misunderstood as advocating for the continued exclusion of women from ordination in Roman Catholicism. I have written elsewhere of the symbolic significance of the issue and how deeply ingrained attitudes and fears play a role in continuing to exclude women. But I am also something of a realist, and it is clear to me that the official church's teaching is not going to change at any time in the near future. It is much more likely that married men will be included in the priesthood, since they already are and since there are no doctrinal barriers to this. Unless Catholic women want to stage a large-scale exodus from the church, which I think is highly unlikely, it makes more sense to take a good look at the present situation and see what we can learn from it.

My suggestions here do not make any theological headway with the basic doctrinal issues at stake. The questions of whether or not women can properly image Christ at the altar, how the relationship between the priest and the church is conceived, and whether or not the churches who maintain male-only ministries would be affected if women were ordained have not been explored here. But, as I have argued elsewhere, the work of women "on the ground" is an important force to consider. Women's "sacramental" practices, whether these be ritualizing important educational moments, doing spiritual counseling, or planning liturgical experiences, are real forms of ministry. And the deepened sense of vocation that many lay people experience in their ministries, their activities of leadership, and the potential for hearing more wisdom from the pulpit, are all worthwhile ways of continuing ecumenical discussions. I suspect that many Catholics can learn more about the joys and stresses of married Protestant ministry and that Protestants can learn much from the diversity of ministries among Catholic laypeople. Preaching exchanges can break open the scriptures in new ways and perhaps encourage Catholics to be more thoughtful and even demanding in their experiences of sermons. In sum, there is much to

be learned from the current situation and we do ourselves an injustice if we fail to see these hidden openings in what may seem to be a closed discussion.

¹This phrase is taken from Pope Paul VI, *Inter Insigniores*, October 15, 1976, Par. 4

²The discussion of the question is complex; see, e.g. Sarah Butler, *Catholic Priesthood and Women: A Guide to the Teaching of the Church* (Chicago: Hillenbrand, 2007); Robert Egan, "Why not ordain women?" *Commonweal* CXXXV, 7 (April 11, 2008), 17-27; Egan's article is a response to Butler's book.

³See Susan A. Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1998).

⁴See <http://www.usccb.org/laity/womrpt2003.pdf> (accessed December 31, 2008).

⁵Ruth Wallace, *They Call Her Pastor: A New Role for Catholic Women* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992).

⁶See "Some questions Regarding Collaboration of Nonordained Faithful in Priests' Sacred Ministry," *Origins* 27/24 (November 27, 1997), particularly Article 6.

⁷See the resources of the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER): <http://www.his.com/~mhunt/>

⁸*Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling*, eds. Barbara Brown Zikmund, Adair T. Lummis, and Patricia Mei Yin Chang (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

¹⁰This is largely drawn from Zikmund et al, Chapter 2.

¹¹Zikmund et al, 51.

¹²Zikmund et al, 69.

¹³Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Effects of Women's Experience on their Spirituality," *Spirituality Today* 35 (Summer 1983), 100-116.