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Is women's ordination old news?

Heidi Schlumpf | Apr. 12, 2010

Janine Denomme, right, with her partner Nancy Katz

Janine Denomme has been fighting two courageous battles. First, the 45-year-old Detroit native has struggled with a persistent, compelling sense of being called to the priesthood that, sadly, has not been honored, affirmed or recognized by the institutional church.

Of course, like most women in that predicament, she has found other ways to minister. A former Jesuit volunteer, she worked with homeless women, taught high school theology and wrote grants for a number of nonprofit organizations. Most recently she served as director of a youth program at The Center on Halsted, a community center for Chicago?s lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered community. She also completed a doctoral dissertation on the role of church women in civil rights.

At her Chicago parish, Denomme?s talents were tapped for liturgy, preaching, the parish council and spiritual direction -- experiences that only strengthened her vocation. Although she has presided at an alternative Catholic faith community and considered ordination in a Protestant denomination, this lifelong Catholic kept hoping for a solution that wouldn?t involve leaving her church.

Now, finally, she will become a Catholic priest.

The Saturday after Easter, Denomme and a Minnesota woman will be ordained by a female bishop, all members of the Roman Catholic Womenpriests movement. The group claims unbroken apostolic succession because its first ordinations were by a male bishop in communion with Rome.

What began in 2002 with the ordination of seven women on the Danube River has grown to include nearly 100 women priests, transitional deacons and bishops around the world who serve as chaplains, spiritual directors and retreat masters, work in social ser-

vice or social justice ministries, and do a variety of sacramental ministries, including weddings and baptisms.

According to the Womenpriests Web site (www.romancatholicwomenpriests.org), an increasing number of

women continue to present themselves for ordination and are completing the required theological study, sacramental preparation, liturgical practice and spiritual discernment for ordination. Last year, 15 women -- including Denomme -- were ordained as transitional deacons, eight as priests and four as bishops. As many or more are expected this year.

That Roman Catholic women are regularly being ordained may still be news to some in the pews, but the secular media are starting to say, ?Ho hum.? The major papers and TV stations in Chicago have already covered two previous ordinations. Been there, done that.

As I teach my journalism students, for a story to be newsworthy it must have impact, immediacy, prominence, proximity, novelty, conflict and/or other emotional connection. ?When a dog bites a man, that is not news,? New York Sun editor Charles Dana famously said. ?But when a man bites a dog, that is news.?

Though timely and of interest to local readers, the ordination of more women by the Womenpriests movement no longer has novelty -- or, to be honest, much impact on ordinary Catholics. None has been named pastor at a local parish. The church refuses to accept the ordination of these women; instead the Vatican has excommunicated them.

The excommunication conflict does pique the interest of reporters, whose articles and news pieces tend to follow a familiar formula: Tell the woman?s story, then get the official church reaction, which invariably involves a condemnation -- of the women and anyone involved or supportive of their ordinations, including hosts (often Protestant churches or synagogues) and most recently Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois, founder of the School of the Americas Watch.

While the secular media yawns, most Catholic media are terrified to even touch the issue of women?s ordination -- except for a few independent voices like NCR and Commonweal. Even relatively progressive magazines like America and U.S. Catholic (which are owned by religious orders) have gotten their hands slapped by the hierarchy for daring to discuss the topic.

In the case of U.S. Catholic, it was for an article written in 2001 by yours truly, in which I allowed five women who felt called to ordination to tell their stories. Inspired by my belief that people don?t really care about an issue until they know someone personally affected by it, I avoided the theological arguments and instead just introduced readers to some dedicated Catholic women who struggled with a call that couldn?t be answered.

Such stories are touching -- and powerful. So is Janine Denomme?s.

I said she was fighting two battles. The second is literally for her life. A year ago, Denomme was diagnosed with colon cancer that had spread to her liver. With the support of her partner of nine years and countless friends and family members, she has been undergoing chemotherapy and radiation -- all while reflecting on the spiritual significance of her illness and her life. Now writing has become her ministry, chronicling her journey and encouraging readers to consider how to live faith-filled lives in the midst of sorrow.

As the date of her ordination approaches, Denomme has faced some serious health complications that involved hospitalization. But that hasn?t deterred her from her plans for priesthood. If anything, her illness has intensified her commitment to fulfilling her call.

?I used to be scared by the prospect of excommunication. But after living with cancer, nothing can scare me more than that,? Denomme says. ?This journey of living with cancer has cleared away any doubts about who I am and who God intended me to be.

?Although none of us know how much time we have left on this earth, I especially am struck with the possibility

of a shortened life,? she says. ?God gave me gifts, gave me a spirit of priesthood, called me to a specific role in assisting people to stop and recognize God in each other and ourselves, to see the sacred all around us and to ritualize our most common experiences. To turn my back on that now, would -- in my mind -- be sinful.?

Now that?s a story worth telling.

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