

Woman bishop talks compassion, rather than ordination

Jamie Manson | May. 9, 2011 Grace on the Margins

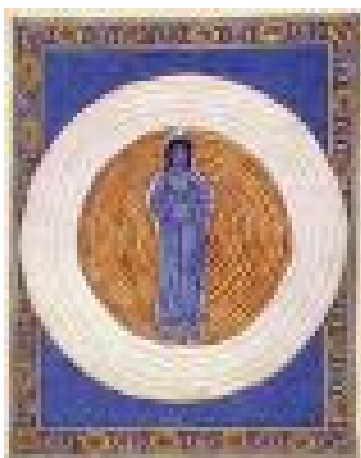


As the progressive Catholic world continues to lament the imminent expulsion of Fr. Roy

Bourgeois from the Maryknoll community, Bishop Patricia Fresen stands as a quiet reminder that many Catholic women have already suffered a similar fate for publicly supporting women's ordination.

Fresen, the third woman to be ordained a bishop in the Roman Catholic Womenpriests movement in 2005, came to New York last Saturday as part of her U.S. speaking tour. Though many attending her presentation presumed that she would address the Roman Catholic Womenpriests, Fresen instead chose to focus on the topic of compassion.

When she offered her talk, titled "Transformed by Compassion," that afternoon, Fresen couldn't have anticipated that one day later New York City would be transformed by news of the killing of Osama Bin Laden. The feelings of retribution that characterized some of the celebrations in the city streets contrasted starkly with Fresen's message that compassion is the only antidote to a world shattered by division and conflict.



Many of Fresen's thoughts were drawn from one of Hildegard of Bingen's icons,

sometimes called "The Compassionate Person." But Fresen's connection to Hildegard runs deeper than her admiration of the mystic's religious imagery. Hildegard served as abbess of a Benedictine cloister in the 12th century. In *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination*, scholar Gary Macy demonstrates that throughout the Middle Ages, popes and bishops referred to the commissioning of abbesses as an ordination. "Early abbesses were powerful and acted independently not only of the papacy, but also of the local bishop," writes Macy.

Hildegard's image shows a Christ figure in the center of an egg-colored mandala. The mandala is surrounded on four sides by sapphire blue, which is meant to evoke the sky and sea. Because of their vast, all-encompassing

nature, the sky and sea are a perfect symbol for the compassion of God.

"Compassion is much more than feeling sorry for someone," Fresen reminded the audience. Compassion is an active force that understands, cleanses, binds, and nourishes. The hands of the Christ figure are outstretched, not clasped together in the traditional form of a holy man. In this gesture, Hildegard's Christ figure reminds us that, like Jesus, our bodies are meant to radiate goodness and healing throughout our world.

In a church where the importance placed on rituals and rubrics sometimes seems to eclipse the significance of God, it was moving to watch Fresen occupy a completely pastoral role, free from the doctrinal disagreements and arguments over excommunication that have dominated the past six years of her ministry. Like the more than 100 Womenpriests who currently minister throughout our country, Fresen's visit was intended solely to do the work that Jesus mandated: calling people to greater awareness of the all-encompassing compassion of God that surrounds us.

Though Fresen's present life has become synonymous with a bold defiance of the ban on women's ordination, much of her past life in the church was a witness to leadership, service and sacrifice. A native of South Africa, Fresen joined the Dominican order soon after completing her secondary education.

Early in her vocation, Fresen learned the importance of defying unjust laws. Though it was illegal in South Africa for whites and black to live under the same roof, her religious community welcomed both races. Fresen, who grew up believing that segregation was what God intended, learned to be colorblind as she sat at the dinner table nightly with black and white women religious.

Fresen's Dominican community later took extraordinary risks by welcoming both black and white children to the school where she served as principal. Though Fresen's humility led her to refrain from speaking about this during her presentation, I was informed by a colleague that she and several other sisters served jail time for these non-violent acts of resistance.

Fresen became emotional as she described watching Nelson Mandela's release from prison with her school children. "He is a model of compassion for us all," Fresen said, "he has never had any bitterness or wish for revenge."

Fresen spent seven years in Rome, studying theology at the University of St. Thomas and at the Gregorian, where she earned a Licentiate in Theology. She then joined the faculty of the National Seminary in Pretoria, where she taught sacramental theology, spirituality and homiletics, teaching many priests how to preach -- a ministry from which she, of course, was barred.

In May of 1996, Fresen completed her thesis and obtained a doctorate in theology from the University of South Africa. In 1999, she joined the faculty of the Catholic University in Johannesburg. Fresen's post ended abruptly in 2003 when she was ordained a Roman Catholic Womenpriest.

Fresen's ordination also forced her to leave the Dominican order. Remembering the risks her community took in breaking Apartheid laws, Fresen hoped that her community would support her in the way the Benedictine community of Erie, Pa., supported Sr. Joan Chittister when she was nearly silenced for speaking at the Women's Ordination Worldwide conference in 2001.

But this would not be the case. "There is a difference between speaking in support of ordination and actually getting ordained," Fresen was told by a superior. As we have seen with Maryknoll's recent treatment of Bourgeois, even religious communities with radical commitments to justice have their limits when it comes to fighting for the just treatment of women within the walls of the church.

Even with such a heavy burden of rejection, Fresen seemed transformed by compassion for those who persecute her. She reminded the audience that we must try to find compassion for those in the church who work to exclude Catholics on the bases of gender, sexual orientation, marital status, or disability.

As a result of her dismissal from the Dominicans, Fresen was left without a job, home, community, bank account, health insurance, and pension. Like many prophets before her, Fresen found herself in exile. Such an extraordinary sacrifice gives only credence to the authenticity of her calling to ordained ministry.

Seeing Fresen's desperate plight, another Roman Catholic Womenpriest welcomed her permanently into her home in Stuttgart -- about two hours outside Hildegard's city of Bingen.

Reflecting on her move to the German city, Fresen noted wistfully, with both gratitude and irony, "I'm living in compassion."

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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