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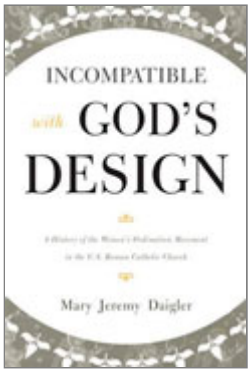
No turning back on spiritual justice for women

Gretchen Minney | May. 8, 2013



INCOMPATIBLE WITH GOD?S DESIGN: A HISTORY OF THE WOMEN?S ORDINATION MOVEMENT IN THE U.S. ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH
By Mary Jeremy Daigler
Published by Scarecrow Press, $75

One subtle thesis of *Incompatible With God?s Design* lies in the wisdom of knowing the past in order to prepare for the future. It is heartening to see a new book that documents the many years of work for women?s spiritual justice in a world where silence is no longer acceptable. The author has been witness to the risks and investments made by women religious, priests and bishops who have been punished for supporting women?s ordination. Those sacrifices have been occasionally reported by the media and certainly have not gone without notice by the next generation of Catholic women and men. Still, they are not afraid and there will be no turning back.

This wisdom is rooted in the Second Vatican Council?s 1962-65 revitalization of the Roman Catholic laity -- from the talk of broader pastoral community involvement, to the church on the horizon that would be built on equality and justice. It was believed that the revitalization would release the patriarchal grip that church hierarchy had on every aspect of pastoral and academic life, and women called to priestly ministry were tempted to believe that ordination would soon be sanctioned for them.

In the late 1960s and into the ?70s, many organizations promoting the rights of women directed attention to the issue of women?s spiritual justice. Among them was St. Joan?s International Alliance. Founded in London at the time of the early-20th-century women?s suffrage fight, St. Joan?s was an alliance of Catholic women leading the way on equal rights for women on every level of involvement in the Catholic church. After Vatican II, Catholics who believed reform was close at hand founded other organizations: the Women?s Ordination Conference, the Quixote Center and Call to Action, just to name a few. Expectations were high.

One statement in particular from the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* may have contributed to those high hopes: ?Every form of social or cultural discrimination in fundamental personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language or religion must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God?s design.?

This was a profound declaration and the likelihood that it would serve as a rallying cry in the fight for women?s ordination drew forth a new population of women who had been called but denied ordination. In *Incompatible With God?s Design*, Mary Jeremy Daigler tracks the evolution of the women?s ordination movement step by step and hero by hero. The women and men of the movement are identified and their contributions told with admiration and respect. The somewhat inconsistent chronology covers a half century or so of leaders, actions and events, as well as those who worked behind the scenes for the cause. One of five appendices, ?Family Tree of the U.S. Women?s Ordination Movement? is especially helpful in sorting out the timeline.

Daigler presents the many schools of thought and strategies aimed at achieving women?s ordination in the Roman Catholic church with an insider?s knowledge of the backgrounds and instincts that guide all called women. Her sensitive telling of the dilemma faced by those who have chosen to be ordained either with apostolic succession (as with Roman Catholic Womenpriests or the Ecumenical Catholic Communion) or without it in another Christian denomination is comprehensive and thoughtful. Her many years as a woman religious and her broad understanding of church teaching give richness to a story that is perhaps only beginning, and this adds to the book?s research value for scholar or interested observer of the contemporary women?s ordination movement, past and present.

Call to Action, Roman Catholic Womenpriests and the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests recently released a slide show video backed up by the Joyce Johnson Rouse rendition of ?Standing on the Shoulders.? It highlights some of the same people profiled in *Incompatible With God?s Design*, who through the years have led and inspired those who have come after. Many of those shoulders are now gone, but this book shows confidence that new shoulders are emerging to bear the weight of the decisions the next generation of called women will face.

As the book marks the milestones of the movement?s history, the reader senses a shift in women?s ordination theory and process. This shift is manifested in ever more aggressive action by women who are gaining Master of Divinity and other graduate degrees in preparation for a life of ministry; women who are not going to allow their call from God to be denied. There was a time for many Catholics when God *was* the church. Diminished moral authority and relevance have driven many from the church and moved others to establish a more intimate relationship with God in a way that makes hundreds of pages of doctrine and dogma seem increasingly insignificant.

This new direction may have come as a result of Pope John Paul II?s 1994 apostolic letter on reserving priestly ordination to men alone, or maybe the truth about the bishops? protection of pedophile priests has impacted perceptions of church infallibility, or perhaps the hierarchy?s cherry-picking of Catholic social teaching is eroding credibility, or maybe it was just the influence of a sea of change generated by the turning of the millennium.

Whatever forces were moving in the mid-?90s, a growing number of called Catholic women came to realize that they would not see ordination in their lifetimes unless they found a way that did not require the blessing of the Vatican. Should they wait without fulfillment or should they take a different path and save a few years of their lives to serve those crying out for acceptance and inclusion in a faith community of equals? The dynamics of this discernment journey is for yet another book.

Although *Incompatible With God?s Design* explores the women?s ordination movement in a conscientious and scholarly way, appealing to historians and religious studies specialists, and even as I have noted, to interested observers of the contemporary movement, one wonders how much the price tag of $75 will help in seeing it widely distributed.

The book, nevertheless, is an integral, one might say ?compatible? part of the growing, and ever more accessible media on this controversial and topical exploration of God?s design for women religious (and their secular sisters).

[Gretchen Kloten Minney is the author of *Called: Women Hear the Voice of the Divine* (Wonder Why Publications, 2010), the story of the contemporary women?s ordination movement.]

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