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Victoria Rue

San Jose State University, victoria.rue@sjsu.edu

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The Church of the Not Yet—Right Now: The Roman Catholic Church and the Grassroots Movement for Women Priests

I am a Roman Catholic woman priest. I am “valid, but illicit.” I am *contra legem*—against the law: Canon 1024 states that “only baptized males may receive the sacrament of Holy Orders.”

The mission of Luther College commits itself to faith, leadership and community service. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church women have been faith-filled leaders for a very long time—and certainly it was women’s leadership at multiple levels of the Lutheran Church that eventually led you to ordaining women in 1970. My friends, we Roman Catholics have a great deal to learn from you and from all our Protestant sisters and brothers. In fact, one of the leaders of women’s ordination in the RCC in the United Kingdom, Myra Poole, who is a Sister of Notre Dame, said recently “women priests are healing the Reformation.”¹ May it be so.

What is this moment that we find ourselves in the Roman Catholic Church today? In the words of a male Roman Catholic priest, Bryan Massingale, “the Church is dying. Or to put it more accurately, a given way of being Church is dying.”² Yes, the Roman Catholic Church in North America is dying. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life affirms Massingale’s statement: “Catholicism has experienced the greatest net losses as a result of affiliation changes. While nearly one-in-three Americans (31%) were raised in the Catholic faith, today fewer than one-in-four (24%) describe themselves as Catholic.”³ Further, says Massingale, “the church is dying and it is being aided and abetted by God’s own self.”⁴ That is the uncomfortable, perhaps unpopular, but also life giving view that many of us have at the grassroots of the Catholic Church today. It is not unlike the fits and starts of how spring comes

on, the weather shifting back and forth, sometimes violently, so that spring can be born. Yes, it is the movement of birth, fits and starts, back and forth. I am reminded of the recent Pew Forum Poll on Religion that finds forty-four percent of Americans shifting, switching, or abandoning religion—a kind of churning up of our desire—for God? A place in the cosmos? To be loved? Churning, re-arranging, grasping and letting go: we are birthing something new.⁵

Massingale further suggests that we need to see ourselves as hospice chaplains to the dying Church, helping the Church to die well so that a new Church can come to be.⁶

Not everyone will be on the same page about this in the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), especially those invested in the hierarchy and keeping things the same. And so Roman Catholics will be at different stages of resisting or embracing the dying. Yes it does sound a lot like Kübler-Ross’s five stages of dying: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and spiraling back and forth among them.

As a Roman Catholic woman priest, I lead liturgies, especially the Eucharist, at a house church in Santa Cruz, California. We call ourselves the Sophia Catholic Community. We have been worshipping together for year and half now. Yet even in a small house church, many of the theological issues that are imbedded in the Roman Catholic Church dying and rising anew are present. Some months ago, an older white woman left the community because she felt I should not speak about being a priest and a lesbian, nor should I refer to my partner Kathryn who is often with us. Sexuality, the woman said, should have nothing to do with priesthood. Other older members in the community want me, as the priest, to make all the decisions. My reaction is to try and get those same people involved in decision making—sometimes it works. The two women leaders of the house church are quite clear however that it is a collaborative effort that brings us together and continues our community. Early on two members wondered out loud if we could have a more traditional Mass because they were not sure about inclusive language. Another wanted the liturgy to incorporate Buddhist ideas with the Catholic Mass. Others are eager to take back the liturgy and make it inclusive and created by all. And so our liturgies try to hold in tension the old and the new—but inclusive language is always used. All of which point to grassroots Catholics being in transition, including desiring women priests. In a recent Gallup poll, from sixty to seventy percent of Roman Catholics want women priests.⁷ Yet inevitably some still wonder why you can’t just “add women and stir.” Can’t we just leave

by
**VICTORIA
RUE**

On March 13 Victoria Rue delivered the Women’s History Month lecture, sponsored by the Luther women’s and gender studies program and the Lucille Price and Mabel and Ernest Sihler Lecture Funds. Rue is professor of women’s studies and comparative religious studies at San Jose State University. She earned a PhD at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley with her work on how feminist theater enacts feminist theology. Rue works to make the Roman Catholic Church more inclusive.

