ELEPHANTS IN THE LIVING ROOM

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WOMEN'S MINISTRY IN THE EARLY CHURCH
ST. BLASÉ

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Introduction — Bishop Tom Gumbleton

As is customary at our Elephants' gatherings, I have the privilege of introducing our speaker today. First of all, a word about our topic. There is probably no topic more pertinent in the Church today, right now, when we face such a critical situation for lack of ministers in our Church and other parts of the world, which you probably know is a dangerous topic in a sense to talk about, the possibility that women might be called in the Church. The Bishop of Australia was fired and reprimanded by Pope Benedict for even suggesting it in a pastoral letter in the diocese, which is probably three times the size of Texas; and they have about 40 priests; and they simply can't do the ministry that is needed. And he suggested, among other possibilities, that maybe we could ordain women in the Church; and he was fired immediately by Pope Benedict. I'm sure you heard about this.

And so I am happy today that it's being recorded. We have someone to speak with us this afternoon who is very, very knowledgeable about the topic, and one who has explored this topic for many, many years: *The Role of Women in the Ministry*. And Gary Macy is the John Nobili Professor of Theology at St. Clare University. He received his Bachelors and Masters Degrees from Marquette University; and he specialized there in historical and sacramental theology. Then, he earned a Doctorate of Ministry degree from Cambridge University. That was in 1978. Dr. Macy has published many, many books. His most recent book, *The Hidden History of the Women's Ordination,* appeared from Oxford University Press in 2007. He has written an extraordinary number of articles. I guess as a professor, he had to take very seriously "publish or perish;" and he didn't want to die out, so he published many, many articles; and one of the most recent is, *The Meaning of Ordination in the First Millennium in Christianity.*

Dr. Macy has had a long professional career as a teacher. He has taught at Marquette University as a teaching assistant then visiting lecturer, visiting professor at Marquette. Acting, Associate, Full Professor at the University of San Diego, Acting, Associate, Graduate Dean at the same university, and, finally, Chair of Religious Studies at the University of San Diego. But, currently, he is Professor of Theology at Santa Clara University in California. Among his long list of articles there is one I found especially – well, for me, it was almost alarming - he has an article, *Some Much Neglected Argument in Favor of Nuclear War.* If you know my history, you know I was really concerned about that. (Laughter) Then I read on. But it was the winner of the Associated Church Press Award for best fictional humor of 1984 (much laughter). I am very pleased that he would write such an article. But I don't want to go through the whole list but I'm sure his articles and books are available in the back, and all of us will learn much if we explore further what he has written. For many years he has been engaged in this topic of women in ministry in the Church. And so I'm very pleased to welcome, and ask you to welcome, Dr. Gary Macy to discuss the topic of *Women's Ministry in the Early Church*. Dr. Macy…. (Applause)

I got some things from the early days of film; [referring to a PowerPoint slide] and one says, "Ladies please remove your hats;" and the other one says, "Gentlemen, no smoking, or spitting, or profane language during the performance." So I would ask you to observe that. Also, thank you for the wonderful introduction, Bishop Gumbleton. One small correction: they don't have my books today. They didn't get here; so you can order them though, (through the Catholic Book Store). There is a sheet, and if you sign up and order them, then they will be delivered to you, I understand. And there are two that are pertinent to today's discussion. One is, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination,* and the other is a more recent book that I did with Phyllis Zagano and William Ditewig on *Women Deacons.* So those two would be particularly interesting, I think.

I'm really honored to be here today. As I was sitting in the airport, for quite a while actually - we had a few problems getting out here - I got an email from a colleague of mine, who is a very well known ethicist, Kristin Heier, who had just testified before Congress on immigration; and she said, "If I remember right, you're going to get to speak to the famous Elephants." (Laughter) So clearly, she thought you were more important than Congress. (Laughter) And I also want to thank you for the warm welcome that I've received. I couldn't have had a more gracious welcome, a more wonderful welcome, from Gerry Bechard, and from the whole parish there, which is a wonderful place. We had Mass this morning, and it was terrific.

Women's Ministry in the Early Church

Well, I was asked to talk about women's ministry in the early Church, which I love to do; and I'm going to go a little further than the early Church into the Middle Ages; and, at first, you might say, as more than one person has said to me, and as someone said to one of the people in the audience today, "That'll be short!" (Laughter) Not really, so much as you would think, although it is true so often, when you talk about the history of women in the Church, it's not a happy history, okay? To give one example: a great Franciscan theologian, St. Bonaventure, decisively declared, "Three things are appropriate to women, of course, silence, discipline and subjugation." Yeah! "As these three proceed from one reason, of course, the defect of reason in them." So, I think you know that history well enough; so I've written about that, and talked about that; but today, I want to talk about the less well known part of the history of women in the Church. And although I don't think there was ever a time when women were considered the equal of men, there was a time when they held positions in the Church, and performed many of the sacramental functions that were later reserved to men. And these women were called ordained. They were described as ordained. So there are a couple of things I want to do today:

- One, is look at the evidence for the ordination of women. I want to talk about some of the roles they played as ordained.
- And then, I want to talk also a little bit about what it meant to be ordained then, because, I think, that's an equally interesting topic for people who are interested in Church reform.

Women described as Ordained

So, first of all, there is an overwhelming amount of evidence that women were described as ordained by popes and bishops. And just to give you an example, in 1018 Benedict VII conferred on the Cardinal Bishop of Porto, the right to ordain bishops, priests, male deacons, female deacons, subdeacons, churches and altars. This privilege was repeated by Pope John XIX in 1025 and by Pope Leo IX in 1049. In 1026 Pope John XIX conceded to the Bishop of Silva Candida, "The consecration of churches, altars, priests, clerics, male deacons or female deacons for the whole Leonine City." Benedict IX continued this privilege in 1037 and also exempted from lay control "priests, deacons, monks, housekeepers, clerics of whatever order or dignity, all holy women or women deacons." Calixtus II, in a privilege of 1223, to the Convent of Holy Savior in St. Julia, in Brescia, granted the abbess the right to seek the ordination of abbesses, nuns, and all other clerics advance to sacred orders from any bishop she wished. Not only popes, but also bishops, included women among the ordained. Bishop Gilbert of Limerick included the injunction in his handbook, *On the Practice of the Church*, the injunction, "The bishop ordains abbots, abbesses, priests and the six other grades." Oh! One more reference. This is an interesting one. From the 10th century letter of Atto, the Bishop of Vercelli, he was describing the ordination of women deacons

into the early Church, and he describes it in this way: "Therefore, for the aid of men, devout women were ordained leaders of worship in the holy Church." So he had no problem with that at all.

A number of medieval liturgical books [referring to a PowerPoint slide] include commissioning rights for women that they call ordinations in the same way that commissioning rights for men are called ordinations. In fact, the rites for men and women are listed together in the books. Ordination rights for women deacons, and I'm just going to look at the Western Rites. The Eastern Rites for the ordination, particularly of women deacons, are very well known and very well studied; so much so, that some of the Orthodox Rites have started ordaining women again as deacons, because the evidence is so overwhelming in the East. There hasn't been so much written about the Western Church, and the Ordination Rites, especially for deacons that show up in the liturgical books, but they are certainly there. The earliest is in an 8th century Pontifical of Bishop Egbert of York. There's another one in the 9th century Gregorian Sacramentary, an extremely influential book, and even in the 12th century Roman Pontifical, which would have been the official liturgical book of the popes, there are Ordination Rites for women deacons.

The most complete liturgy for the ordination of a woman deacon

The most complete liturgy for the ordination of a woman deacon occurs in the 10th century: the Romano-Germanic Pontifical. The Ordination Rite for a woman deacon takes place within the Mass and begins with the instructions, "When the bishop blesses a woman deacon, he places the orarium on her neck. However, when she proceeds to the church, she wears it around her neck so that the ends of both sides of the orarium are under her tunic." Now the orarium is a form of stole that, according to the Council of Toledo in 633, was worn by bishops, priests and deacons. Again, according to the Council, the deacon was to wear his orarium on his left side when he preached. So it is officially a stole for preaching. [referring to a PowerPoint slide] So if you can see, this is from a Gospel book in the 12th century; and it's the Annunciation. It's an Illumination of the Annunciation; but if you look close, and I don't know if you can see it on there, Mary is dressed as a deacon. That is a dalmatic, which is the stole that a deacon wears, with a stripe down the front and around the bottom. So she's dressed as a deacon, and she has the orarium, the stole around her neck, and the ends are tucked in. So she's on her way to be consecrated a deacon; and my reading here is that she is going to go and read the Gospel; only in this case, she is going to produce the word of God. Isn't that a beautiful picture? So, obviously, in the 12th century they were familiar with women deacons. She also has like a veil on, and that would have been part of the ceremony as well. Now, interestingly enough, Ordination Rites for abbesses are also found in several important liturgical books. You usually don't think of abbesses as ordained; but that's certainly how they thought about it in the early Church; and again I'll talk about that in a bit.

The Ancient Spanish liturgy book, known as the Mozarabic Rite, contains an Ordination Ritual in which an abbess receives both the mitre and the staff, indicating the episcopal stature of Spanish abbesses. And again, I am going to talk more about these abbesses who acted as bishops. Now, interestingly enough, the Mozarabic Ordination Rite for an abbot does not include the reception of a mitre. There are ordination rites also in 8th and 9th century liturgical books; and again, in the Romano-Germanic Pontifical, which is very important because it was so widely copied. I know it is a weird name, but it's partly German, partly Roman. And they have two separate ordination rites for abbesses. It's also described in the 12th century Roman Pontifical; and that's the official liturgical book of the pope. So the official liturgical book of the pope has ordination rites for both women deacons and for abbesses.

Women Deacons

Now who were these women deacons? So, right now, I just want to talk about deacons. Well, according to Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, in their documentary, *History of Ordained Women in the Early Church,* there were at least a hundred women deacons that are still recorded in the annals of the Church. That's a lot! There are more other women ministries as well. No one's counted up the abbesses who were ordained; and there are some references - and I'll talk about that in a bit - a few references to *episcopa*, which is the feminine for bishop and *presbytera*, which is the feminine for priest, or sarcerdota. There is only one deacon mentioned by name in the entire New Testament, that's her, Phoebe. [referring to a PowerPoint slide] That's it! Sorry, Stephen's not even talked about as a deacon. I know we say that, but if you look at the text, it doesn't say anything about them being deacons.

There's only one deacon: Phoebe. It's the only one in the New Testament. So, if you are looking for evidence for deacons in the New Testament, you've only got one by name. That's Phoebe, there she is. And we just had that reading today; so you're familiar with it. Now quite possibly, now again, this is according to research done by Carolyn Osiek - she's got a couple of books out about women in the early church, I'd really recommend to you - Phoebe probably owned a house. She was probably a wealthy woman who owned a house. Now, at the time, if you owned a house, you also were the person who was the host or hostess; so, of course, you invited people to your house; and then you would have a dinner party, a symposium. And at the symposium you would probably invite in a speaker, or some kind of entertainment. So it sounds like in the early Church, you had men and women, who owned houses, who would invite someone like Paul in, or invite one of the Apostles in, to give a talk after a dinner party. Now once they were established as Christian house churches, they would have had the dinner party; but that would have been the Eucharist. But still, according to Carolyn Osiek**,** it would still have been the hostess who was in charge of that; and then, after the mea, then you would have had a reading from Scripture; or you would have a man or woman come in and give a talk. So that is one of the most famous women deacons, of course.

Then, in the third century catacombs, Priscilla, there is a picture of one of these house churches and symposium [referring to a PowerPoint slide] with people sitting at the table; and the person who is leading the liturgy is this woman who has her arms up like this, with her stole on; and she's praying; she's leading the service. It's really a beautiful picture.

A century later, about 365, so in the middle of the 4th century, a daughter was born to a notable family. Olympias was one of the wealthiest, most powerful, and best known women in all of her time. Her grandfather was Oblobius, a praetorian prefect and consul, and one of the new Christian nobility created by Constantine. As a young girl Olympias knew Gregory Nazianzus during his brief occupation of the episcopate of the capital in 381. He was later invited to her wedding. He was not able to attend, but he sent a poem as a gift. How lovely! In 385 she was married to Nebridius, a second marriage for him, who was likely much older that she. He became Prefect of Constantinople in 386, but he died quite soon afterward. So, at the age of 20, Olympias was already a widow. From then on, she refused to marry in spite of pressure from the Emperor Theodosius I, who for a time deprived her of her right to administer her vast properties until she reached the age of 30, thinking that she would go ahead and get married. She never did. Instead, she adopted the aesthetic life, and founded a woman's monastery in Constantinople, next to the cathedral, which became the center for spiritual life and works of charity. And she got really involved in politics. She was ordained deaconess by Bishop Nectarius when she was still in her 30s, although the minimum age was supposed to be 60. Her most famous friend was John Chrysostom, Nectarius's successor; and she was John's most loyal supporter.

There was a big controversy over John Chrysostom's being bishop of Constantinople. Do I want to get into that? Sure! Okay! John Chrysostom. Chrysostom was not his last name, as probably some of you know. Chrysostom means golden mouth, because his sermons were so popular, he would pack whole churches full of people, not even Christians, just because he spoke so well. [referring to a PowerPoint slide] He was such a beautiful speaker; and that was entertainment in those days - no TV, no IPADS. It was pretty dreary; and you couldn't read, so speeches were a big thing. The problem was that he often gave speeches that got him in a lot of trouble. And he gave one where he just ripped into the emperors for being rich. He had a thing about ripping into people for being rich. One of his sermons, for instance, says, "I look out on this congregation and I tell you - and I'm not making this up - there is enough gold in the ears of the women of this church to help every poor person in this city." Glad he's not my bishop! But in any case, it got him into trouble.

But Olympias supported him throughout all of his troubles, and even went into exile with him; and she died in exile. So she died supporting John Chrysostom in his efforts to reform the Church, one of the deacons. Oh yes, there's Olympias, it's a bust of her. [referring to a PowerPoint slide] You can't see it very well, a contemporary bust; and alongside it is a scripture commentary by one of the early male scholars; but the person who wrote that with was a female scripture scholar that he corresponded with.

This is one of my favorites. [referring to a PowerPoint slide] This is St. Radegund; and she lived in the 6th century. She was a Frankish princess who was captured by King Clotaire I of France as a child and

became his wife. I can assure you it was under pressure. That is the way marriage was done in those days. He killed almost all of her family too. She had one surviving brother, and Clotaire killed that brother too, around 550. It was a pretty rough time. She fled from the court and I don't mean that she left. She got on a horse, and she went with the knights after her, and she went to the Bishop Medard, the Bishop of Noyon; and insisted that he consecrate her as a woman deacon. Now he knew that the king was not going to be thrilled with this. This is a description of the incident written by a friend of hers who actually knew her. So this is a contemporary description by a very famous poet, Venantius Fortunatus, okay? maybe not that famous, because I don't know how many people - I mean you don't read Venantius every day, I suppose – but, oh well; he's good. "She left the king, and went straight to the holy Menard at Noyon. She earnestly begged that she might change her garments, and be consecrated to God; but mindful of the words of the Apostle, 'Aren't thou bound unto a wife? Seek not to be loosed.' The bishop hesitated to garb the queen in the robe of a monacha (nun)." A monacha would be a holy woman - that's where we get our word monk; but in this case it is a deacon. "For, even then, the nobles were harassing the holy man and attempting to drag him brutally through the basilica, and away from the altar, to keep him from veiling the king's spouse, lest the priest imagine he could take away the king's official queen, as though she were only a prostitute. The holiest of women knew this, and, sizing up the situation, entered the sacristy, put on the monastic garb, and she proceeded straight to the altar, saying to the blessed Medard, 'If you shrink from consecrating me, and fear man more than God, Pastor, He will require his sheep's soul from your hand.' He was thunderstruck by that argument and, laying his hand on her, he consecrated her as a deacon."

She was one of the most forceful learned and admired women of her time. She became an abbess, as well as a deacon, and was involved in lots of different controversies at that time. Now on the left side up there is her writing desk, [referring to a PowerPoint slide] not a replica but the real thing. Historians get really excited about this. But this is actually the desk she took around with her on horseback when she wanted to write letters; and it's beautifully carved and flips open. Oh well! Okay? But I love this kind of stuff, because it's an actual physical thing she had. So….

Now the last woman deacon I want to look at is Heloise of Paris. She's one of the last women deacons we know of. She was the wife of a very controversial 12th century theologian Abelard; and their marriage didn't work out so well. Some of you know the story - that's why you're laughing - to put it mildly, okay? and he became an abbot, and she became an abbess. They were both extremely learned, knew Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew; and she eventually became a very successful abbess. Now, both Abelard and Heloise refer to Heloise as a deacon, and often. And Heloise asked Abelard to write what's called, *The History of Holy* W*omen*. And he goes back through history, and all of the Church scholars before the 12th century, and writes a beautiful book, if in fact he wrote it - I have my suspicions somebody else wrote it. Guess who I think wrote it? (He laughs.) Anyway it's a very, very strong argument for the ordination of women, based on the writings of the Church fathers; and in this book, he or she not only calls Mary Magdelan the apostle to the apostles, but the very first apostle to the Gentiles was not Paul, according to Abelard and Heloise; it was the Samaritan woman. Interesting? Right? I know! So it's a beautiful little book and it just goes through all of the evidence for that. And that was probably the last theological defense for ordained women in the Western Church until modern times.

Now these are just the most prestigious references to the ordination of women from the 6th through the 12th centuries. Many others, from bishops, theologians, wills, chronicles, charters, and vitae, I could give you the whole list, but that's enough; and I don't want to bore you to tears; and I want to get on to some other things. But, by now, you are thinking to yourself, "Yes!, of course they called them ordained; but they weren't *real ordinations,* right?" Because, starting in the 12th century, you have people like the cannon lawyer, Gratian - in fact he is the first one to say this in the 12th century – "Women can neither attain to the priesthood or even to the deaconate." That's Gratian in the middle of the 12th century. By the way, he's the first one to make that argument; so it's the middle of the 12th century. So what are we gonna say about that?

<u>One definition of ordination.</u>

Well, there are two things that, I think, have occurred to you. One is: something changed! Women stopped being ordained. And they stopped calling them ordained. Now that's really the most obvious point; because if they hadn't stopped ordaining women, it wouldn't even be an issue now. We'd just be

doing it. Now something else changed too; and that's the definition of ordination changed. Now that didn't necessarily mean that they had to stop ordaining women; but it is extremely significant. For the first millennium of Christianity, for the first one thousand twelve hundred years, the words *ordo, ordinatio and ordinare* had a far different meaning than they would have in later centuries. Pierre van Beneden has argued that early Christians appropriated the language of ordination for use in their communities from everyday usage.

The words *ordo, ordinatio and ordinare*, those words in Latin, are just ordinary, everyday, common words; they do not refer to anything religious. They just mean to put something in order. An *ordo* is just any regulation of anything. And if you ordained something, you put it in order. So here's an example: those books are in alphabetical order; they are ordained. And that's the word you would use in Latin. I just ordained my books yesterday. Doesn't mean what it meant in English. It meant you put them in some kind of order, big to small, alphabetical order, something. And the *ordo* was the system you used to organize them, or the different rankings: big, little, small, ABC, the A word, or the B word, and so on. Also, in society there were different ordos, especially Roman society was very closely structured; and if you belonged to an *ordo* in society, you had a particular job to do; you wore particular clothes; there were things assigned to your particular ordo. In the Middle Ages they often, often, famously, spoke of their being three *ordos*, three orders in society: knights, peasants, and churchmen and churchwomen. But there were three. Those were the three *ordos*.

So *ordo* doesn't necessarily mean at all what we mean by ordination. You can't even translate it that way, really. So any ceremony and/or installation, or election of a bishop, or a priest, or a deacon, or a sub-deacon, or a porter, or a lector, or an exorcist, or an acolyte, or cannon, or an abbot, or an abbess, or a king, or a queen, or an empress, was an ordination. Why? Because what you were doing was that the local community was giving you a new state, a new role, a new function, within the community; and that's what an *ordo* was. That's what an *ordo* meant, okay?

So you can see easily - I know you know this - you can see easily why there were no priests in the early Church, 'cause nobody did that function. A priest was someone who did sacrifices, a man or woman who did animal sacrifices, or some kind of sacrifice in a temple. Well, Christians didn't do that; so why would they call anybody that? Well, here's a plumber. Does he fix pipes? Oh no! no! Never goes near pipes. (Laughter) Why do it? Why call him that? So anytime you changed your function in the community, there could be a ritual that you would be elected by the community for that; and there would be a ritual you would go through. So marriage is an ordo in the Middle Ages, of course; you're changing your status, your role your function in the community.

Now to quote the famous Church historian and Cardinal, Yves Congar, "Ordination encompassed at the same time election as its starting point, and consecration as its term. But instead of signifying as happened from the beginning of the 12th century, the ceremony in which an individual received a power henceforth possessed in such a way, it could never be lost; the words *ordinare, ordinari, ordinatio* signify the fact of being designated and consecrated, to take up a certain place, or better, a certain function, an *ordo* in the community, and in its service." So the ordination didn't give you some kind of power that you could use anywhere. What it was, it gave you a function within your community. And you didn't go from community to community, because you didn't have that function in another community.

The community would pick a person that they thought would do the best job, whatever the job was, and it was an election - they didn't hand out ballots or anything - but it was a consensus of the community that so and so was going to be the leader, so and so was going to be in charge of the money, and so on, or go out and visit the sick. And then, they would have a ceremony that was an ordination; and then that person would do that. That's the way it worked for every position; and there wasn't a sense that you moved from position to position to position. No!

So a lot of the most famous popes in history were never priests. I know sounds weird doesn't it? Leo I, Leo the Great, was not a priest, ever; he was a deacon. But he was the best man for the job; and the community chose him; and he was consecrated bishop, ordained bishop in his day. Same with Gregory the Great; never a priest, because you didn't have to; it didn't work like that. It wasn't that there was one kind of ordination that was special or better. No! All the people who had functions were equally ordained.

Now some people were more important than others, clearly; and they had more important jobs; but some people weren't more ordained, and some people less ordained. So you could move from one job to the other, okay?

The most famous example - and I'm sure you know this story, or I expect many of you do - of St. Ambrose of Milan. The bishop died unexpectedly; and the people got together; and, you know, were basically chanting, "Give us Ambrose. Give us Ambrose." And they really wanted Ambrose as bishop. So they told him - he was out of town and he came into town and they told him - and he said, "Okay." After a while he accepted the job; but then they had to get him baptized. (Laughter) He was a catechumen. I know! So that tells us a couple of interesting things. First of all, understanding of ordination is extremely different. It was considered adultery for a bishop to move from one community to another, and was seriously forbidden. And ordaining someone who wasn't ordained to a particular community is not allowed. Well, it's seen as a terrible thing. Occasionally, it's allowed; but it's seen as a terrible thing until Pope Innocent III allows it, starts to allow it. And Pope Innocent III died in 1211; so this is about 1200 that it's first even allowed for someone to be ordained not to a particular place. So that's a very unusual thing.

Oh! By the way, another side note – oh, these side notes are really main stuff. I just like to stick them in, because it's more fun to say it that way. Do you know when the pope first claimed the ability to appoint all of the bishops in the world? Does anyone know? 1870? Yeah! Actually, I think it was actually 1898 is the first time the pope even claimed the right to appoint all the bishops in the world, in a Treaty with Guatemala and Honduras, I think; and it's not in Canon Law until 1917. So that's a brand new thing. The ancient custom of the Church is that bishops are chosen by the clergy of their diocese, with the consent of the people. That's a 1900 year old tradition. Brian Tierney - we'll I'll get to Brian in a minute - but in any case, so that's what we are talking about. Ordination was when the community picked you for a particular job; and then you went through a ceremony; and then had that role, that job, but not outside your community.

<u>Another definition of ordination</u>

As the quotation from Cardinal Congar indicated, only in the 12th and 13th century do theologians and canonists devise, after lengthy debates, another definition of ordination. And according to this definition, which is the one that we're familiar, with ordination gives the person not a position in the community but a power that you can exercise in any community; and that power is the power to consecrate the bread and wine. That's the central power! So all of ordination collapses into the priesthood. Now I want to mention, it's only in the 13th century that theologians argue that ordination bestowed an indelible character on the soul of the ordained. So that's 13th century before that gets introduced. Bit of it in the 12th, but mostly it's a 13th century thing. So now, all of the other orders now are not orders at all, just the one; or the two that are connected to the one: the deaconate, the priesthood, and then bishops. They had a big fight about whether they are separate or not; decided not! Now that in itself is really interesting; but along with that went the exclusion of women from orders. Not inevitable, because they could have continued to have women deacons, even if abbots and abbesses are no longer considered ordained; but they didn't; and that's another whole other story. And by the way, Vatican II reintroduced the idea of having more than one Ordo in the Church, because they knew their history; and that's permanent diaconate, which is not the priesthood. So now we have two Ordos where we had one, two *ordinaes.* Now I think that is very interesting, because they are different Ordos. They're different *ordinaes.*

So what did these ordained women do, these ordained women? Well, they performed sacramental and administrative functions that would later be reserved to men, of course. They celebrated the Mass; they distributed Communion; they read the Gospel; they heard confessions; and they preached. Some abbesses also exercised episcopal power; and, indeed, a few were considered bishops. The most famous of the episcopal abbesses was the Abbess of Las Huelgas in Spain, who continued to wear her mitre and exercise her episcopal administrative power till 1874. She was in charge of 36 parishes. She appointed all of the parish priests, everything! So the first thing, of course, the most controversial, the celebration of the Eucharist. Evidence from the 4th through the 11th centuries indicates that a few women led liturgies with the approval of at least some bishops.

The scarcity of evidence does not necessarily mean the practice was unusual, because, of course, that the source survived at all is amazing. They wrote on vellum; vellum wore out; leather, it wore out; and

once you don't ordain women any longer, and in fact once you argue they never had been ordained, why copy this stuff? But some things have survived. There is a stone carving dated between the 4th and 6th century found near Poitiers in France commemorating that: "Martia, the priest, *presbytera*, (feminine) made the offering with Olybrius and Nepos," a marker commemorating that event. Scholars who have studied the carving agree that this inscription refers to Martia as a minister, who celebrated the Eucharist along with two men, Olybrius and Nepos. The Council of Nimes, held in 394, noting that women seem to have been assumed into Levitical service, ordered that such ordination should be undone when it is affected contrary to reason. It should be seen that no one so presume in the future. Now that means that women were either acting as deacons, or they were acting as priests; it's hard to know what Levitical service means here; but there is something going on there; they are not doing right, or something, because they only want it done if it is done according to reason. One hundred years later, in 494, Pope Gelasius, in a letter to the bishops in southern Sicily and Italy, spoke out against the bishops who were allowing women to serve on the altar. Gelasius had heard that "women are confirmed to minister at the sacred altars and to perform all matters imputed only to the service of the male sex, and for which women are not competent." Now what's interesting about that is that Gelasius is not angry with the women; he's angry with the bishops who are ordaining them to minister at the altars.

Fifteen years later bishops Licinius Melanius and Eustochius of Northern Gaul wrote to two priests from Brittany. They were furious to learn that the priests traveled with women, who assisted them at the altar, "so that while you are distributing the Eucharist, they hold the chalices, and presume to administer the blood of Christ to the people of God." The women were referred to by their companions as *conhospitae*, something like housemates, indicating that probably these were the wives of the priests. Now you have to remember, during this time, that there was absolutely nothing wrong with priests and bishops being married. That was quite common. That only changes, again in the 12th century, with the introduction of the law of celibacy. There was evidence that there were a number of these husband and wife teams that were bishop, or priest, or deacon, the two of them together, and that's probably what is going on here. In 747 Pope Zachary wrote to the Frankish authorities, who wished to know if nuns could read the Gospel or sing at Mass. Zachary replied in the negative, and added, "Nevertheless, as we have heard to our dismay, divine worship has fallen into such distain, that women have presumed to serve at the sacred altars; and the female sex, to whom it does not belong, perform all the things that are assigned exclusively to men."

So, despite all these dire warnings, it goes on, and on, and on into the 9th century, when at the Council of Paris, the bishops were appalled to learn, "that in some provinces, in contradiction to the divine law and to canonical instruction, women betake themselves into the altar area, and impudently take hold of the sacred vessels, hold out priestly garments to the priest, and, what is worst, and more indecent, and unfitting than all this, they give the people the body and blood of the Lord, and do other things which themselves are indecent." Now, again, it's very clear that it's bishops they are angry with here, because in a report of the acts of the council to the bishops, the council says, "Doubtless this occurred through the carelessness and negligence of some bishops. They have given themselves to carnal passions and illicit actions, so that women, without anyone preventing them, betake themselves into the consecrated houses and therein have been able to introduce unpermitted things." I think that this just means that bishops were married and these were their wives. I think that's all this means.

Now, you have to remember, when these laws were collected, they were collected by the reformers who wanted to remove any indication that women had ever served on the altar; but what they left in was negative evidence. Because, by saying again, and again, and again, over the centuries: "We have to stop bishops from doing this! We have to stop bishops from doing this!" it tells us bishops were doing this. (Laughter) So, certainly, women did distribute, despite these dire warnings, they did distribute communion in the 10th, 11th and perhaps the 12th century; and we know, because we have the liturgy for it. We have the actual liturgy for this.

Texts for these services, with prayers written with feminine wording, and endings in the rubrics, saying "She should do this; she should do that," exists in two manuscripts of this period. One was copied in the 11th or 12th century at the Abbey of St. Sophia in Benevento for use by nuns in that community. The second dates from the 10th or 11th century, and while the prominence of the manuscript is unknown, the use of feminine word endings lead scholars to believe that it too was used by nuns. The famous medieval

scholar and Benedictine monk, Jean Leclercq, notes: "It's never said or supposed that the one who recites these prayers is a priest; nevertheless in their *ensembla*, they really constitute a long Eucharistic prayer". Again, according to Leclercq, note that these prayers correspond, more or less, to the series of text which serve as an introduction to the Mass and entrance psalm, litany, penitential rite, collect and profession of faith. Now, again Leclercq, makes a point of this, and it's really true. These were manuscripts that were used because liturgical manuscripts were far too expensive to make unless you were actually using them. You just would not do this! Costs way too much money! So he thinks these were used, and used in several places.

We have an example of just such a communion service in the life of St. Odilia. The holy woman died while her sisters were in prayer. "Alarmed that she had died without receiving the body and blood of Christ, they prayed that her soul return to her body. The miracle was granted. Odilia was furious!" (Laughter) And the author continues, "And when the chalice in which our Lord's body and blood were contained was ordered to be brought to her, accepting it with her own hands, and participating in holy communion, she handed over her soul while all watched." So, clearly this is just the nuns; it is the middle of the night; and they just went and got the body and blood of Christ; and they did it.

Also hearing confessions, the main duty of an abbess was very similar to that of an abbot. One of the main things they did was hear the confessions of the nuns or monks in their monasteries or convents; but they also would hear the confessions of people from the surrounding area. Now let's see what we have. [referring to a PowerPoint slide] That's the three orders: knight, monk and peasant. That is a portable altar as the men and women would have been using in Brittany. And there is St. Odilia. See! she's got her crosier. And there is St. Bertila with her crosier, the lady I am talking about now. Now, this is an interesting passage. Listen closely, because I have a question for you when it's over. We have a little quiz. "Bertila," this is a quote from the life of St. Bertila, "Bertila drew the family of the monastery or the surrounding neighbors," so this is all the villages and surrounding area, "through Holy Communion, so that hearing their confessions, they would do penance for their sins." Now I read this passage a hundred times before something finally dawned on me. If I were reading this about a man and I said - and it was Bertilo, okay? "drew the family of the monastery or the surrounding neighbors through Holy Communion," what would you think? The Eucharist! It didn't dawn on me. I'm not looking for that. I'm not used to looking to see if women are referred to in that way. I wrote the whole book before I realized, "Oh my gosh! I missed something, again." So I think that there is a possibility that there is a lot more out there, even if I'm missing them; and I've been looking. Wow! So, St. Ides as well, heard the confession, and gave penance to a murderer, who sought her out to hear his confession; and when he refused to complete his penance, she had to give him another penance that he finally fulfilled. So this is confession with penance, and forgiveness, and the whole thing.

Finally, in the time I have left, I want to give you some examples of female bishops and abbesses who acted as bishops. There are very few known references to women bishops in Western Christianity. The most famous is from this mural. [referring to a PowerPoint slide] So the lady on the far left with the square halo - that's because she is alive when it was done probably - this is the mother of the pope, Theodora, and around her head in the mosaic which is from the 9th century, it says, "*Theodora Episcopa*:" Theodora, the Bishop. She was the mother of one of the popes; and as far as we know, her husband had no particular ecclesiastical post of any kind. So we don't know what she did; but we have that famous 9th century mosaic.

Now Bridget of Ireland was also described as a bishop, but not only as a bishop, but also as having successfully undergone consecration to the ranks of the episcopacy. There's a 9th century Celtic life of Bridget, the *Berthu Brigte;* that describes it. Now a couple of things about this book. One is it's hundreds of years after she's died; so it's not reliable at all. Secondly, it's partly in old Celtic and partly in Latin. Thank God this part was in Latin, because my old Celtic is really slim, *seanta* is about all I can manage. And this is in the 9th century. Whoever wrote this did not have a problem with Bridget being a bishop. "The bishop, being intoxicated with the grace of God, did not recognize what he was reciting from his book, for he consecrated Bridget with the orders of a bishop." (Laughter) I know it's pretty funny picture. He's going, "Oh my gosh!" He opens the book, and he starts reading, and he reads the wrong thing; but she's bishop, and he has no doubt she is bishop. "This virgin alone in Ireland," said Mel, "will hold the ordination; and while she was being consecrated, a fiery column ascended from her head." Isn't that a

great story? Now the reference is extraordinary for several reasons, but you already know the reasons. One is whoever wrote this in the 9th century had no problem that Bridget be a bishop. He also thought that if you said the words over her, okay! she's a bishop; it's all done; no problem!

Another reference to a woman as a bishop occurs on the tombstone of Matilda, the daughter of Otto I, who died in 999. I think she probably tried to hold for a year, don't you? She's described not only as an abbess, but also as the Metropolitana of Quinlinburg. Metropolitana is a word that's only used as a word for an archbishop. It's a very rare word, but it only means an archbishop. Now what did she do as an abbess; or what did the 9th century person think Bridget did? Well, we have a pretty good idea of what they thought, because there were a number of abbesses who had episcopal authority. The most powerful one is the one I mentioned: the Cisterian abbess of Las Huelgas, near Burgos, in northern Spain. She wore her mitre, and as I said, carried her crosier until she was forbidden to do so in 1873; it took a year of litigation to get her out of there though. These were really, really tough abbesses. The history of Las Huelgas is impressive. Alphonse VIII of Castile and his wife Eleanor of England, daughter of the more famous Eleanor of Aquitane**,** decided to establish the monastery of Las Huelgas after Alphonsus victory over the Muslim armies at Cuenca in 1178. So we have 1178 to 1874. Over the centuries the abbess accumulated complete ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the territory, villages, and villas subject to Las Huelgas**.** She had the power to appoint parish priests for the countryside subject to the convent of Las Huelgas. This involved some 64 villages. So she established the parishes; she appointed the priests. She could establish new parishes; she could unite parish churches, or reopen closed churches. She could approve confessors for all her subjects, and examine their credentials, if necessary. Apart from and alongside the power the abbess had over her own clergy, she also had the power to confer licenses to say Mass, or to hear confessions, or to preach in those areas subject to her control. She issued wedding licenses. No bishop or delegate from the Holy See could perform a visitation of the churches, or the altars, or the curates, or the clerics, or the benefices under the care of the abbess. They could not come in to regulate her. She could commute last wills and testaments. She had the power to visit and examine the adequacy of the apostolic, imperial or royal notaries; and if she found them delinquent in their duties, she could punish them, or prohibit them from office. She had the authority to reserve cases regarded to her subjects, just like any other bishop; and finally, she was able to convene a synod, and make synodal constitutions and laws for both her religious and lay subjects. So she was pretty much a full on bishop.

Now one or all of these extraordinary powers of the abbess of Las Huelgas were confirmed by Pope Honorius III in 1219, Pope Gregory IX in 1234, Pope Innocent IV in 1248, and again in 1252. In fact, I don't have the story in here, but it's a good one. Let's see. Oh! that's St. Bridget with her crosier. [referring to a PowerPoint slide] Now that is Las Huelgas; [referring to a PowerPoint slide] it's still there. And that is one of the most famous of the abbesses and of Austria. [referring to a PowerPoint slide] They were usually from the royal families, the abbesses. I have to tell this story, after the Council of Trent, Trent passed a law saying no more extraterritorial bishoprics, which is what this was. We're not going to have that anymore; it's forbidden. So Anne of Austria, the lady, who is pictured there, wrote the pope and said, "And how, *ahem*, does this apply to us?" And he said, "Oh! don't worry; doesn't apply to you." I mean, they were just too powerful to touch. I'm sure it's because her dad had a big army, but…. (Laughter)

<u>Conclusion</u>

Okay! So what can I say about this history of the ordination of women? Two important lessons. First of all, women have been ordained in the past. Now you can have a theological debate about whether that's real ordination or not, of course; but there're problems, because, of course, men were ordained under the same understanding of ordination. So, okay? But that's a theological argument. As far as historians are concerned, women were ordained. As I was telling Gerry (Fr. Gerry Bechard), it's as if you argued if Queen Elizabeth II is really a queen, because she doesn't have the same power as Queen Elizabeth I. You could have that discussion, if you were a political scientist; but no historian is ever going to say they weren't both queen, all right? So historians: women were ordained. Theologians, you could say, well let's have a discussion whether they were really ordained; and that gets more complicated, perhaps. So the historical argument may not be definitive for the ordination of women now, but certainly, you could say that it would be wrong to argue that we can't do it because it's never been done.

Especially, the argument for women deacons is a strong argument, because the evidence is so clear, and because now, since Vatican II, deacons are a different *ordo*, a different order; that the permanent deaconate is from the priesthood. So if you would argue - and you would be quite right that the papacy has forbidden women to become priests - there's nothing about women becoming permanent deacons. And actually, officially, the word on that it is still an open question. So, just recently, maybe some of you read this, the Archbishop of Freiburg, Robert Zolltisch, who chairs the German Bishop's Conference, like U. S. Catholic Bishops Conference, called for the ordination of permanent women deacons. That just happened last week. Yeah! I know! And there is an article in the paper about a lady in Evanston; and her parish approached Cardinal George about her being ordained a woman deacon; and he said, "I will talk about it. I will ask them in Rome." Yeah! I know! He didn't say, "No". He said, "Let me check." So this is still an open question. Of course, there's still an important questions about women being ordained as priests, right? But you can see how, right now, they should be two separate issues; and one is still open.

So, to close, I would like to adapt the words of Brian Tierney, the great church historian, to apply to the ordination of women. He said that if the Church ever decides to be democratic this is true. "And if in the future the Church should choose to adapt such practices to meet its own needs in a changing world. That would not be a revolutionary departure, but a recovery of a lost art of the Church's own tradition." Thank you. (Applause)

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