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Womenpriests Ordain First Orinda Woman Catholic Priest

By Sora O'Doherty



Joanna Truelson Photo Sora O'Doherty

Joanna Truelson took a big step in her spirituality last when the Orinda resident was ordained a Roman Catholic womanpriest at a ceremony at the Orinda Community Church June 25.

The ordination, the first of its type in Orinda, was under the auspices of Roman Catholic Womenpriests, an organization founded in 2002 in Germany. The officiant was womanbishop Olivia Doko of San Luis Obispo, who was ordained a womanpriest in 2006 and a womanbishop in 2010. During the ordination Bishop Doko stated, "We are not restricted by the past."

The Roman Catholic Womenpriests describes itself as a renewal movement within the Catholic church that began in Germany with the ordination of seven women on the Danube River in 2002. After the ordination of the first priests, women have also been ordained womenbishops so that, according to the Roman Catholic Womenpriests, they continue to ordain priests in the Apostolic succession.

Roman Catholic Womenpriests claims that the

ordinations they perform are "valid but illicit," as they are in violation of Canon Law. But they believe that they are in conformance with Apostolic Succession. RCWP has members in 28 states of the United States and Europe, Canada, South America and South Africa. RCWP says it has four ordained womenbishops, (and an additional two retired), 10 womendeacons and approximately 90 ordained womenpriests.

Of course, none of this is accepted by the Roman Catholic Church. When asked to comment on the ordination of Truelson, Helen Osman, Interim Director of Communications for the Oakland Diocese said the ordination "may be in the geographical area of the diocese, but this ordination has nothing to do with the Roman Catholic Diocese of Oakland, just as an ordination for any other church within the geographical area of the diocese has nothing to do with the Roman Catholic Diocese of Oakland."

According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, which collects statistics on Catholicism in the United States, in 2015 there were 37,578 Catholic priests in the U.S. for a total Catholic population of 68.1 million. There were 3,533 parishes that had no resident pastor and the number of active diocesan priests per parish has been steadily declining from two in 1965 to one in 2015.

Truelson was raised in New York and studied nursing at Belle-view Hospital. After moving to California, she obtaining a BSN degree, and a master's from the University of California San Francisco, with a major in Mental Health Nursing Administration. She worked as a medical surgical pediatric coordinator for 24 years. Following a year in which her father died and she got divorced, with two young children, age two and five, she changed her profession to realtor, which allowed her to spend more time with her children.

Truelson found a program called "A Course in Miracles." First she took the course; now she acts as a facilitator. She followed Matthew Fox from Holy Names College to his own University of Creation Spirituality, and in 2000 obtained the degree of Doctor of Ministry. (Fox was an ordained Catholic priest who was expelled from the Dominican Order and later became an Episcopalian priest.) Truelson later attended the Chaplaincy Institute in Berkeley, and was ordained an Interfaith Minister, also in the year 2000.

Since then, she has traveled all over the world on volunteer missions. She attended the Parliament of World Religions in South Africa and has worked with Airline Ambassadors International (AAI), a registered charitable nonprofit organization that donates and distributes millions of dollars in aid to clinics, schools, orphanages and programs in 52 countries. With AAI she went on a medical mission to Haiti, and has traveled on such medical missions to South East Asia, Russia and Siberia.

Now Truelson feels that she has found her home in the RCWP.

Truelson has been a Womenpriest deacon, and is a founding member of Namaste Catholic Community in Orinda, which meets for Mass on the second and fourth Saturdays of each month at the Orinda Community Church.

Truelson imagines that, had she been alive at the time of Luther, she probably would have followed him. The Catholic church changes, she thinks, when enough people leave, and she thinks that now people are leaving the church. She also believes that Pope Francis, although he has stated that "the door is closed" to the ordination of women priests, is working for small changes that may, eventually lead to the acceptance of women priests.

Truelson admits that she has tried the Episcopalians, but, although they have been ordaining women priests for 40 years, she found them too restrictive. For example, she said, some accept gays, and some do not.

Ultimately, she says, her desire to become a Roman Catholic priest is about standing up to power. And the Womenpriest movement adheres as closely as possible to the conventional route to priesthood so that, someday, perhaps, when the Catholic church decides to accept women priests, they will be ready.

But what will happen when she is excommunicated? Truelson laughs. "When I first got divorced, I was told that I could no longer receive the sacraments" she recalls. She went to the Newman Center in Berkeley then. But when she wanted to remarry, the Newman Center would not perform the ceremony. She parted with the Newman Center and shortly thereafter she parted from her second husband. "We make mistakes" she said, "and we forgive ourselves and others."

According to Truelson, her religion is all about love and inclusiveness. If you find that a religion is about judgments and fear, she said, you are on the wrong path. She believes in the resurrection, but as to an afterlife, her views are unconventional. "I believe that heaven is here right now," she said, and that is about loving each other and connecting.

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