

Womenpriests on the prospect of female deacons

By [Vicki Garlock](#)

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There's the Pope Francis buzz. And then there's reality.

Last week [news outlets reported that](#) Pope Francis would form a commission to study the issue of female deacons in the Catholic Church. The predictable reverberations began immediately. Within days, the phrase "female priests" [wormed its way into the headlines](#). While some hailed the pope's progressive stance and [remarked on potential changes in the Catholic Church](#), others pointed out the [lack of historical precedent](#) for female deacons serving in the same role as their male counterparts. More [in-depth analyses and clarifications](#) soon followed.

One group in particular remains highly skeptical that any real changes will occur: the women already ordained as Roman Catholic priests.

[Roman Catholic Womenpriests](#) began in 2002, when two bishops ordained seven women on a boat in international waters on the Danube River. Today the group has its own bishops to perform ordinations. With more than 225 priests and candidates ministering to more than 75 worship communities throughout the world, RCWP is creating change on its own terms. As Suzanne Thiel, ordained priest and board officer for RCWP-USA, told me, "We are not going away and we are growing."

Training for the priesthood through the RCWP program is as rigorous as it is for men. Candidates must earn a master of theology, a master of divinity, or an equivalent degree. Since womenpriests are generally volunteers, most have other jobs.

Yet even after completing their official training, the path for womenpriests remains bumpy. Their ordination violates Canon Law 1024, which states rather simply that "a baptized male alone receives sacred ordination validly." Still, only a relative few have been formally excommunicated (a reversible process, by the way, intended to facilitate repentance). Some Catholic sisters are ordained using an alias. At least one woman lost her job at a Catholic parish simply for expressing an interest in RCWP's program, but a more common scenario is being quietly shunned by members of the establishment.

Womenpriests might perform many allowable duties under one male priest at a parish, only to be told a few years later by a less progressive priest that their services are no longer needed. Or, a womanpriest ministering to her own faith community might be told by a male priest in the same town that he can't collaborate or even interact with her.

"So why don't they just become Protestants?" my husband asked, somewhat indelicately. The women I spoke with, and others who have publicly answered this question, all say more or less the same thing: Catholicism is my tradition. "It's who I am," offered Jennifer O'Malley, a priest and president of the RCWP-USA board. "I've looked into the possibility of becoming something else, but the rituals and Catholic social teachings are really inspiring to me."

Despite their commitment to their faith tradition, many RCWP priests are skeptical about a sea change at the Holy See. As O'Malley said: "It's not just about ordaining women. It's about ordaining women in a renewed Catholic Church. It's about including people who are currently excluded—the divorced, the remarried, the members of the LGBTQ community."

Thiel echoed her sentiments: "It's a much bigger picture than just the ordination of women. It's about the oppression of women, a renewal of the whole church, and a return to gospel issues."

[Like others](#), these women are doubtful that we'll even see ordained female deacons any time soon. Helen Weber McReynolds, a relatively new RCWP candidate, said the pope's statement "is a glimmer of hope, but I'm not getting my own hopes up about anything concrete happening any time in the near future."

There's the Pope Francis buzz, and then there's the reality. The pope's commission will study female deacons. And the number of ordained female priests will continue to grow.