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The Push to Ordain Women Priests Gains Ground

By **DAWN REISS / CHICAGO** Saturday, Sep. 25, 2010

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Alta Jacko's (third from left) ordination to be a deaconate on Nov. 1, 2008. She would later be ordained as a priest in 2009.

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Alta Jacko is the mother of eight children. She is also an ordained priest in the Roman Catholic Church. Jacko, 81, who earned her master's degree in pastoral studies from Loyola University, a Jesuit Catholic school, says that being a priest is what she was called to do.

Officially, of course, the Catholic Church's canon law 1024 says that only baptized men can receive holy orders. But there is a movement against the no-women rule, one that began eight years ago when a cluster of renegade male clerics (including a European bishop whose identity the female priests won't reveal in order not to risk his excommunication) ordained the first women. Now, in Jacko's hometown of Chicago, three women have entered into the priesthood.

(See "Robes For Women.")

Like many priests, Jacko trained in various parishes before becoming ordained. Unlike many other priests, however, she was not always easily received by her elders. In spring 2009, Jacko approached Father Bob Bossie who preaches at St. Harold's Catholic Community in Uptown for help. "She asked me if I would mentor her," recalls Bossie, a member of the Chicago's Priests of the Sacred Heart who was ordained in 1975. Bossie acknowledges that the concept of females in the priesthood is difficult for him. He says he literally shudders at the thought, saying that when the image of women in robes once flashed in his mind, it "left me cold."

And yet Bossie helped Jacko anyway. He wanted to help a friend.

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While Jacko was training to become a deacon, a mandatory step prior to priesthood, it was Bossie who taught her how to say the liturgy. "I did it because she asked me, because she's very thoughtful," Bossie says. "When someone you like and respect asks you, you try to do it."

Bossie is speaking out publicly for the first time, even though he knows he could lose his job as a priest, his pension and his home. And even though he disagrees, intellectually, with women being in the priesthood, he says his feelings tend to be more complicated than that. "I'm not going out of my way to support it," Bossie says. "I don't think that's sexist. I am a priest, and this is breaking down the hieratical priesthood.... But if people ask me for help, I feel compelled to help, out of respect and love. If God called me, why wouldn't God call a woman?"

It is a question that more and more members of the flock are asking. Many have begun to challenge publicly the Church's stance, especially after the Vatican decreed in July that ordaining female priests was a "grave" crime, on par with pedophilia. What's more, Biblical passages refer to women clergy, including a female apostle named Junia in Romans 16:7. On Sunday, Sept. 26, thousands of Catholics around the world plan to protest, either by boycotting Mass or by showing up wearing green armbands that say "Ordain Women." "Women are tired of being treated as second-class citizens in the Church," says Irish Catholic Jennifer Sleeman, who turns 81 Sunday and is helping to champion the "**Sunday Without Women**" demonstration organized by Women's Ordination Worldwide (WOW).

"We are disobeying an unjust law," says Barbara Zeman, 62, Chicago's first ordained Catholic female priest, who serves as a hospital chaplain at Northwestern Memorial Hospital; she will protest Sunday at St. Nicholas Catholic Church in Evanston, Ill. "Many male priests have told me to go for it, and that they can't wait until the Church changes its attitude.... It's a movement whose time has come."

The WOW movement was also showcased in the recently released documentary *Pink Smoke over the Vatican*, which aired Sept. 18 at Chicago's Irish American Heritage Center for an audience of hundreds of Catholics, ordained and lay. The filmmaker, Jules Hart, said she had originally turned down doing the documentary — "I'm not even Catholic," she says — but reconsidered after hearing the ordeals of several female Catholic priests, including Jacko.

Jacko, who was featured in the film, was present at the Chicago screening. After the film concluded, she recounted to a reporter her experience of becoming a priest. A portly balding man walking past, paused and told her: "If you don't have any rights, I don't have any rights."

But when asked his name, the man refused to give it, stating that he could lose his job in the Catholic Church if he were publicly attributed. It is the same reason that so many men of the cloth who help women into the priesthood do so only in hiding.

A pastoral associate in northside Chicago, who has also asked for his name to be withheld, has had a hand in elevating two of Chicago's three women priests. He taught Jacko how to break the bread and bless the cup for Mass. They practiced at the altar in

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the pastor's church in secret, while it was empty, Jacko says. He taught her how to say reconciliation and say a homily, and answered her endless questions. "I was talking to him about spiritual things," says Jacko. "I would bounce questions off him." [\(See the 25 most influential Evangelicals in America.\)](#)

He also helped train Janine Denomme, another of the city's female priests, who died of cancer in May 2009. He sang at Denomme's priesthood ordination earlier that spring, and stepped in again to assist her funeral at the First United Methodist Church in Evanston, Ill. The services could not be held in her own church because the Catholic Church did not officially recognize her priesthood, which resulted in her excommunication — something the pastoral associate says still upsets parishioners. "I was determined to be as public as I could. I supported her priesthood," he says. "You are just ignoring a gift when you bury it in the sand and pretend it doesn't exist. We shouldn't just be satisfied with the status quo. The Holy Spirit has sent the priests that we need, but our hierarchy is refusing to recognize them."

And yet in public, the pastoral associate does not dare to break ranks. The day after Jacko was ordained — on Oct. 10, 2009, at the Ebenezer Lutheran Church by the female Catholic Bishop Joan Houk (a male priest would be excommunicated for ordaining a woman) — the pastor met her for coffee. He informed Jacko that now that she was a priest, she could no longer be a lector of the readings or distribute communion in her Catholic church.

"He broke the bad news to me," Jacko said. "We were so close and it was hard to take. He had walked every step of the way with me."

A week later, on the Sunday after her ordination, Jacko sat in the front pew of her Catholic church wearing her collar. "I wasn't going to [wear it], but all of my friends said, 'How are we going to know you are woman priest, if you don't wear your collar?'" Jacko says. "I thought it made sense."

Jacko says the congregation showed her respect and congratulated her. But then she received an email from the pastor, on behalf of the church, telling Jacko that she was "welcome in the church but not with my collar," says Jacko who is now saying Mass on a rotating basis at St. Harold's Catholic Community. "I know it was hard for him to do. He had to make a choice, and he chose to tell me that instead of standing by me."

But Jacko adds, "There are a lot of Catholic priests who are helping the women priests. You'd be surprised."

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