



a woman's place
is at
the Altar

Calgary's only female priest is a member of a small but growing movement that is challenging the very nature of what the Roman Catholic Church considers sacred.

*by Malwina Gudowska
photography by Leah Hennel*



Monica Kilburn Smith, Calgary's only female priest, welcomes an average of 40 people to monthly mass. She says she has "a loving rage and a raging love for the church, and a deep caring for women."

There's something both ironic and prophetic about meeting a Roman Catholic priest at a Humpty's restaurant. With its grim, 1990s-inspired decor and large booths that swallow you up, the eatery best known for "breakfast that never ends," regularly serves as a weekend confessional for morning-after tales of wild, alcohol-fuelled nights. Tonight, it's filled with mostly older folks, many alone, ordering steak sandwiches and either quietly pondering life, it appears, or reading trashy newspapers, or both.

And then there's that famous egg: proud, Humpty sat on a wall until he had his fall and, at that point, no one could put him back together again. The nursery rhyme's themes of descent and finality are weighty symbols for what could happen to an institution which critics, and even many supporters feel is in a time of crisis.

As she (yes, *she*) comes through the Humpty's doors, the first thing I notice about Monica Kilburn Smith is the brilliant white hair that frames an incongruously youthful face. The 51-year-old Calgarian greets me warmly but cautiously before unbuttoning her long black coat. Kilburn Smith was ordained a Roman Catholic priest on May 29th, 2008.

She is the only female priest in Calgary, one of eight such priests (and one female bishop) in Canada and one of more than 100 in North America and Europe who are part of the Roman Catholic Womenpriests (RCWP), an international group seeking to reform the Church.

"The phrase I use when asked why I do this is 'a loving rage and a raging love for the church, and a deep caring for women'" says Kilburn Smith. "The church should be at the forefront, leading the way and saying 'Women are as holy as men. Women hear God's call like [men] do, and let's listen to them.' But they don't."

Kilburn Smith and other women priests believe their ordinations are "sacramentally valid" because they were ordained in the same "apostolic succession" that ordains men as Roman Catholic priests. The RCWP movement began in 2002 with the Danube Seven, a group of seven women who were secretly ordained on the river in Central Europe by male bishops in good standing with the Church. Two of the seven women were later ordained bishops by several male bishops in Europe so that they could continue the movement. The identities of the male bishops cannot be revealed be-

cause they continue to work within the Church and would face excommunication. For their part, the Danube Seven women were excommunicated six months after being ordained.

The Vatican doesn't see these as legitimate ordinations, stating that women priests are acting outside the Catholic Church. In May 2008, it issued a penalty of excommunication, decreeing that any women who are "ordained" and the bishops who "ordain" them would be automatically excommunicated. In 2010, the Vatican slapped the label *delictum gravius*, or grave crime, on female ordination—and placed it in the same category as pedophilia. However, no priest convicted of pedophilia has ever been excommunicated from the Catholic Church.



While sexual abuse is seen as a crime against morality, the ordination of women is a sacramental crime according to the Vatican, meaning it's a transgression against holy orders. While the Church excommunicates people for "sacramental crimes," it leaves the "moral crimes" for society to deal with.

"By the way they are treating us, it seems that what we are doing is worse in the church's eyes than sexual abuse. It is seen as sacrilege in religious eyes...It's challenging the very fabric of what is holy," says Kilburn Smith.

born into a Roman Catholic family in Montreal, Kilburn Smith underwent a crisis of faith while attending the University of Victoria. In her 20s, she explored

different ways of thinking, immersing herself in feminist reading, Jungian psychology and other spirituality traditions, trying to discover for herself what she believed in. "The world started to expand so I stopped going to mass for a few years," she says. "I wasn't sure what I believed anymore."

But in her late 20s, she went back to church with a friend on a Palm Sunday and was overwhelmed by "the beauty of the ritual, the colours, the music, all of that."

It rekindled her interest in attending church, and she began studying the work of theologians such as the late Catholic priest and eco-theologian Thomas Berry and Matthew Fox, an American priest known for the Creation Spirituality move-

ment that embraces mysticism, the environment and other spiritual traditions.

Kilburn Smith went on to do a master's degree in theology, have two children and became a professional chaplain, a field in which she continues to work. The roles of a chaplain and a priest overlap; both are rooted in a faith tradition but the former does not require ordination; therefore, many women go into chaplaincy if they are drawn to ministry. Healthcare institutions, for example, employ chaplains to serve the pastoral, spiritual and emotional needs of patients, families and staff.

Around the same time, she became a member of the Catholic Network for Women's Equality (CNWE), an organization that played a key role in her journey toward priesthood. She also began going to church in the homes of a local group that supports married male

Although female priests lead mass in a traditional way, there are some adjustments. For example, the language is gender-inclusive; God is neither he nor she.

At the ordination of Edmonton's Ruth Wasylenko on March 31 are, from left, Monica Kilburn Smith of Calgary; Wasylenko; Bishop Marie Bouclin of Sudbury, Ont.; and Michele Birch-Conery, Canada's first female priest, of Nanaimo, B.C.



priests. (For its part, the RCWP movement does not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation or marital status, and does not require its priests to be celibate.)

But it was the day she heard Michele Birch-Conery, the first Canadian female priest to be ordained, speak as part of a CNWE event, that things changed forever. "I went up to [Birch-Conery] and said: 'I think this is really brave and I feel I might be called to do this one day.'"

"The famous last words," says Kilburn Smith, who is currently working on a doctorate in theology.

After her ordination in Victoria, B.C. in May 2008, Kilburn Smith performed her first mass for 25 people at a friend's home that July. Two months later, the group began renting space from St. Andrew's United Church one Sunday a month; it's where they continue to meet. "The first time I said mass at a friend's house, the fear was absolutely palpable in the room," she says. "It's a very deep fear; it's a fear that in some ways doesn't have an object. It's not just about [losing] jobs; it's about what you were taught as you were growing up; it's about disobeying authority."

Many of the members at Saint Brigid of Kildare Catholic Faith Community, as the congregation is called, cannot openly discuss their involvement with the community for fear of being ostracized by devout Catholic family members and friends, and potentially losing jobs if they work in a Roman Catholic institution.

The fear-based tribal mentality—"Who is in and who is out...who will be saved and who won't," says Kilburn Smith—is exactly what she wants to move away from in the Catholic Church. She hopes that, through having a welcoming and inclusive community at St. Brigid's, those people who left because they could no longer relate to the church might one day return.

Monica Kilburn Smith performs Easter mass for the Saint Brigid of Kildare Catholic Faith Community; the group rents space from St. Andrew's United Church.

The primary argument against Roman Catholic women priests is that, according to the Bible, Jesus chose 12 apostles—all men. But some counter that the apostles were never actually ordained priests and priesthood came much later (in the New Testament, Jesus is the only true priest), and that Mary Magdalene, the biblical figure who was the first to see Jesus post-resurrection, was the apostle to the apostles. As well, there are a number of other females in religious leadership roles, including the deacon Phoebe and the apostle Junia, mentioned throughout the New Testament.

"There is no evidence among critical scholars of the Bible that would suggest that women should not be in the ministries of the church," says Michael Duggan, a theology professor and chair of Catholic studies at St. Mary's University College in Calgary. In 1976, biblical experts made that point to the Vatican, bringing forth evidence showing there were no scriptural objections to the priestly ordination of women. Rome rejected their conclusion. Where it gets more complicated, says Duggan, is that the Vatican is not looking at scripture (a.k.a. the Bible) alone.

"In the Roman Catholic Church, the two pillars in determining doctrine are scripture but also tradition of the church," says Duggan. "And where the Roman Catholic Church anchors its position is more in the received tradition of the church over the centuries. It's an example of trad-



ition being the filter, or the lens through which the people in Rome look at the scripture."

For Fr. Stefano Penna, vice-president of college advancement and development at Newman Theological College in Edmonton, it's a tradition that dates back 2,000 years. "Tradition is a different thing than passed-on education or knowledge because that is constantly augmented," says Penna. "Tradition means handing on faithfully that which [is] received from before. As a church, in which we are united in the ancient churches, the Orthodox Church, those who pay very close attention and are deeply respectful for our tradition...We do not feel ourselves able to welcome into ordained ministry, women."

RCWP dispute the notion of a male-only tradition in the church, citing scholars and archeologists whose study of frescoes, mosaics and tombstones has revealed evidence of women priests and bishops in the early church.

When it comes to the question of gender equality then, Penna is quick to point out that leadership in the church is not limited only to priests, and that women have been in leadership roles in the church for centuries. "It's hard for a world that sees that lack of access to everything equals discrimination against some," says Penna, who adds that refusing to allow female priests is not meant to be a put-down against women by the church.

But that's exactly how the supporters of the RCWP movement see it, and for many of them, sexism is at the core of the issue.

“Religion is a male purview, a male model and women kind of need to do what they are told and the men know best,” says Kilburn Smith, a self-described longtime feminist. “Can’t have women priests. Why? Because the rules say and the traditions say there are no women priests. Well, who made the rules? The men. So it just goes around, around and around.”

There’s a culture of fear in the church of everything feminine, says Marie Bouclin, ordained as Canada’s first RCWP bishop in October. Bouclin says that realization “clicked” when she heard American Rev. Marie M. Fortune speak at a conference in Seattle. Fortune, the founder of an organization that works to end sexual and domestic violence, began her talk by saying that it was only when women were ordained in the Protestant church that the problems of sexual abuse by clergy and family violence began to be taken seriously.

Bouclin, a former nun who is now married with three children, studied theology and worked with women who had been abused by clergy, publishing her thesis on the subject in 2000, the same year she attended Fortune’s seminar. Shortly after, she became actively involved in the women’s ordination movement and, in 2002, attended the Danube Seven ordinations. In 2007, Bouclin herself was ordained a priest, and, last fall, was chosen by the other Canadian women priests as their bishop.

“Here we are, women who deeply love the church, where most of us are more than qualified to be ordained in terms of academics,” says Bouclin, 71. The preparation program for women priests includes doing a master’s degree in theology or divinity, ministerial experience, liturgical practice and at least a year of preparation with a mentor prior to the ordination. “And the church is in a situation where it is going to disappear for lack of priests...People are saying: ‘They are sacrificing the church at the altar of a male, celibate priesthood.’”

While the number of Catholics is decreasing in the West, it is growing in Asia and exponentially rising in Africa. In short, the expansion of the Roman Catholic Church is occurring predominantly in countries that have traditional, often patriarchal cultures.

“The people of the Vatican would say, the reason we are not giving in to, so to speak, new trends, is because we think that the culture of the West is quite self-indulgent, and is unwilling to make sacrifices the way more traditional cultures are,” says Duggan. “Therefore, it’s

healthy to have the discipline of the tradition... We are answerable to people across the globe, and people across the globe do not think like the wealthy, privileged people of the First World.”

The RCWP see this as a prime opportunity for the church to be at the forefront, leading the way in abolishing patriarchal mentalities and promoting the equality of women everywhere.

And although he’s seen “the deep, sinful machismo that has to be broken” in a number of cultures, Penna says breaking the unity of the church is not the way to do it. “We know that the transformation of the world in the developing regions and here, is dependent on women occupying in the world, and in society, positions of leadership and empowering them

“We want to change the system, we want to change the nature of priesthood—not just add women and stir.”

—MONICA KILBURN SMITH

[to do so]. For us, unity—even when it means sacrificing certain realities of where we’d like advancements to be—is very important to us. Unity with the Lord, unity with tradition and unity of the world...It’s not a question of adapting our teachings to the time.”

He points to the Anglican Church, which is deeply divided by the issue of women clergy, as a warning of what could happen if global unity is broken within the Catholic Church. One of the largest communities of Anglicans lives in Nigeria, says Penna, noting that: “Anglicans in Canada and the United States ordain women as priests and bishops...[In Nigeria] they will not go to any Eucharist that is presided over by a woman, so within that community you have fundamental splits and divisions.”



St. Brigid of Kildare is one of Ireland’s three patron saints (or, in gender-sensitive language, matron saint). She was a fifth-century nun, bishop, artisan, healer and founder of the Abbey of Kildare. To honour the saint’s roots, the Calgary community that shares her name incorporates a Celtic spirituality—focused on nature and the environment—into its mass.

Although the mass is a traditional Roman Catholic one in many ways, there are some adjustments. For example, the language is gender-inclusive throughout mass; God is neither he nor she. “Naming God exclusively as the Father Almighty or Lord—a lot of people can’t go there, especially women.” The Aramaic version of the Lord’s Prayer sometimes recited, and begins with, “O Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos,” as opposed to the standard, “Our Father, who art in Heaven.”

The emphasis is on simplicity. Instead of wearing elaborate vestments during mass, Kilburn Smith usually wears a plain white alb and stole, and, during the readings, she’ll often sit to one side, close to the congregation. After consecrating the bread, she offers it to her parishioners first, rather than taking communion ahead of them, as is the Catholic tradition. The bread is gluten-free; Kilburn Smith discovered some members of the congregation had allergies and so were not able to receive communion. As laid down by the papacy, Canon Law states that there must be wheat in the bread that is to be consecrated, but Kilburn Smith does not see her offering of gluten-free bread as a defiant act; it’s simply putting the need of the people ahead of the laws, she says.

On average, 40 people attend monthly mass, and the number is growing. Each has a story of how he or she came to St. Brigid’s. Jenny Miller, for example, attends with her husband Garth. She grew up Catholic and wanted to stay in the faith, but before coming to St. Brigid’s she would leave mass feeling angry because of the lack of inclusive language and sense of patriarchy. Four years ago, she read about Kilburn Smith’s ordination in the newspaper, got in touch with her and began a renewal of her Catholic faith. “Monica’s homilies and interpretations of the Bible readings are truly inspiring. Now, when mass is over, I feel peaceful and rejuvenated instead of feeling angry like I did in the past,” Miller says, adding that it’s not only about Kilburn Smith being a woman but about her being a warm, inspiring and thoughtful priest.

But for Frank Firkola, his presence is a state-

ment that has everything to do with Kilburn Smith being a woman. First and foremost, he says, he wants the church to recognize women’s equality. But he also thinks they just make better priests. “Women have more compassion, have more emotional sensitivity and, if we want to consider the whole people’s calling—the physical, the emotional and spiritual—they are better equipped to do that.”

Patrick Griffin, a former Jesuit (an official religious order of men under the Catholic Church), attends St. Brigid’s with his male partner. Although he studied for the priesthood for eight years in New York in the 1970s, he left the order while in graduate school. “I was finding it increasingly difficult to be a public representative of an institution that, in my opinion, supported homophobia, supported sexism,” says Griffin.

Although many members of the community speak candidly about St. Brigid’s, there are equal numbers who cannot for fear of losing jobs or being shunned by family members and friends. And that dread of coming out in support of RCWP transcends the St. Brigid’s congregation. A number of male priests in the Catholic Diocese of Calgary I contacted for this story would not speak on the record for fear of losing their jobs. One priest, known among peers as being more liberal, said: “It’s too dangerous for me to speak.” Another priest, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said: “It’s no different for the Holy Spirit if you are a man or a woman. If I was the Pope, I would allow women priests and priests wouldn’t have to be celibate.”

Bishop Frederick Henry, the bishop for the diocese of Calgary, did not respond to repeated requests for an interview.

Other priests are more pragmatic. Peter Doherty, an associate professor of psychology and family studies at St. Mary’s Univer-



Symbolism takes a more feminine role in the Saint Brigid of Kildare Catholic Faith Community. From left: a Brigid’s cross, a statue of the Virgin Mary and a basket of gluten-free bread for members of the congregation with allergies who were previously unable to receive communion.

sity College and an ordained Catholic priest, says, “I can see my church’s position; let’s take this slow and let’s take a look at it...If it’s of the spirit, it will stay, if it’s not, it will pass.” Although, he adds, with the level of conservatism in the church today, he doesn’t see it being open to the possibility of women priests any time soon. “The power structure that you know is always better than the power structure you don’t, so what happens if women became priests, bishops and ultimately the Pope? It’s going to be a huge change, a radical change.”

Although Vatican approval would add legitimacy to their movement, members of the RCWP are not holding their collective breath. Rather, they believe in what they call “prophetic obedience,” or answering the call of God rather than obeying “some men.” And although the issue of gender-equality is at the forefront, it’s also about creating a different kind of church. “We want to change the system; we want to change the nature of priesthood—not just add women and stir,” says Kilburn Smith.

The bigger question for RCWP and all Roman Catholics today, then, is what is church and what is priesthood? In many cases, priesthood has become synonymous with power. Male priests in the Catholic Church are often put on pedestals and separated from the people, as opposed to being with them and focusing on pastoral care. Incidentally, all of the people interviewed for this story agree on one thing: priesthood is not a career; priesthood is a vocation, a call from the church, from God, and should have nothing to do with power. “We need to deconstruct a lot of doctrinal edifice and go back to what it is that Jesus asked of us,” says Bouclin. “And in that sense, that’s where RCWP fits into the broader reform movement within the church.”



On March 31st, Ruth Wasylenko was ordained the second woman priest in Alberta and the first in Edmonton. Priesthood has been a childhood dream for the former nun. “We had some great-uncles who were priests and they used to come over from time to time and we’d have mass in the house,” says Wasylenko. “As soon as they’d leave, we’d put on our little scarves and a little rope around our waist and we’d have mass ourselves.”

Approaching her ordination, Wasylenko said she felt a sense of wonder every time she tried on her alb and, although she’s euphoric about the opportunity to fulfil her childhood dream, she’s aware it’s not under the ideal circumstances. “I can be what I want to be, but not the way I want to be,” she says.

The RCWP members reject the penalties of excommunication and believe reforming the church begins from within. The Church can deny someone communion and some level of participation within the community, but only individuals can deny their baptism and entirely exclude themselves from the Church.

Kilburn Smith feels there’s still a long road ahead in terms of official acceptance, but she firmly believes that change is already happening, whether the Vatican approves or not. Things could turn on a dime. “It’s like the Soviet Union with the wall coming down; it could happen just like that. You don’t have to write a novel, you just have to turn the page,” she says.

With the images of walls tumbling down—and maybe even some great falls happening—it’s tempting to rework the end of that 19th-century nursery rhyme: *All the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put Humpty together again. But then, no one asked the king’s—or the queen’s—women to help.* **S**

