

IF I WAS MALE AND SINGLE

Denise Donato



If only the eight-year-old girl, whose heart was broken when she was told she couldn't be an altar boy, could have known about the journey of the sixty-year-old woman who would be the first woman consecrated as a bishop in the Ecumenical Catholic Communion. I suppose John White knew what he was talking about twenty-five years ago when he told me that Jesus was holding a staff, which he was going to give to me when the time was right. "It will be your choice whether to take it or not. You still have gifts to develop," he said. "I know that because the staff is intricately carved to a certain point. But someday Jesus will offer that staff to you, and you will need to decide whether to accept it or not. You need to know," he continued, "that I am not a Christian. I do not usually experience Jesus walking in with someone. Master Teachers are dressed in blue, there are various Master Teachers here, and the one holding the staff for you is Jesus."

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Growing up in a traditional Italian Catholic family the little girl could never have imagined any of this! All I knew at the tender age of eight was that deep within my heart there was a desire, a longing to be closer to the altar. I had watched the altar boy's every move with yearning. I knew when it was time to bring the bowl of water for the priest to wash his hands, when to ring the bells, and the most important of jobs—how to hold the gold plate under the chin of each person, just in case the precious Body of Christ slipped from the communicant's tongue. I was sure I knew it better than many of boys who sat in the chairs on the altar yawning every Sunday. My mother told me that if I wanted to be an altar boy I would need to ask the priest. When I finally got the nerve, I was shot down in the blink of an eye—my spirit was crushed!

However, the longing in my heart only grew stronger! Once I got my driver's license I started to attend the 6:30 a.m. Wednesday morning Mass in the basement of the rectory. It was me, the priest, and five or six businessmen every Wednesday morning, in a dank dark basement, with buckets catching the water dripping from the waterlines, but I loved it! We all stood around the altar at the Eucharist and lifted our hands as Fr. Kreckle lifted the bread and wine and my spirit soared. I couldn't understand why none of the boys in my fellowship group were talking about going into the priesthood—what a wonderful opportunity this was! When I voiced my query, they looked at me like I was crazy. "But, just think about leading Mass, helping people on their faith journey. You're missing out on such a great opportunity." "If it's so great why don't you become a nun?" they said. "I don't want to be a nun!!" I vehemently responded, but I stopped short of uttering what was deepest within me. I couldn't admit, even to myself, that I longed to be a priest. It seemed blasphemous. My Catholicism had led me to believe that God doesn't call women to the priesthood. Period. End of the story. As such, my prayer often ended with the sentence: "If I was male and single I would know

what this means.” I knew that God was calling me to something more, something deeper, something that felt like a vocation, but I clearly did not feel a calling to become a nun, and as a woman this was the only option.

I carried this yearning in my heart into adulthood: “If I was male and single... .” I could not complete the sentence. I wasn’t male and having met and married my high school sweetheart I was no longer single, and there were no roads that led down that path for me. Others saw it in me as well: “Perhaps you should become Episcopalian or Methodist,” they would say, but I didn’t feel called to leave the Roman Catholic Church. This calling within my heart was deep, but my faith tradition was equally deep for me. As an Italian Catholic woman, it seemed like Catholicism was a part of my DNA. “I don’t feel called to leave my faith,” I said.

I encountered this calling yet again in the 1980s when I made the nineteenth annotation of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius retreat through the Sisters of Mercy in Rochester, NY. It was the second week of this thirty-week retreat, and I was praying on Moses and the burning bush. “Lord, I feel you calling me—a deeper calling than I could have even imagined. If I was male and single I would know that I’m called to the priesthood.” As I wrote these words in my journal it was the first time I had ever dared to finish the sentence. My shirt was wet from the rivulets of tears streaming down my cheeks. I had said it! But I paused. It felt sacrilegious to let the declaration stand on its own, so I continued. “But I’m not—so I must be mistaken.” The longing in my heart was greater than ever, but the pain of finally admitting it, and realizing there was no path leading to its fulfillment, was even greater. Oddly, instead of questioning the church, I began to question myself. If God doesn’t call women to the priesthood, I must be really full of myself to believe God was calling me. I spent the next eight years in this painful process of beginning to acknowledge the call, only to disparage myself

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for believing it. As Teresa of Avila indicates in her book *Interior Castle*, we expect that the closer we get to God the holier we will feel. However, quite the opposite is true. When we come into the intensity of the Divine Light we see our shadow side more clearly. Rather than feeling holy, the predominant feeling is one of unworthiness. It is true that a feeling of unworthiness often accompanies a true calling, but the places I went were very deep and dark. My calling was tainted with the misconception that because women are not allowed to be ordained in the Roman Catholic Church, God must not call women, so I must be full of the deadly sin of pride!

All of this began to change when I had another prayer experience. In my prayer I experienced Jesus giving me a gift. My heart leapt as he handed it to me, beautifully wrapped with a big red bow on top. However, as Jesus handed me this gift I suddenly began to sob, as I immediately knew that the gift in the box was ordination, and as long as I remained in the Roman Catholic Church I would never be able to open the box, much less try it on for size to see how it looked on me! This prayer experience broke my heart, as I immediately knew I wasn't crazy—God was indeed calling me to ordination. But what was I to do? I still did not feel that God was calling me to leave Catholicism. I suddenly realized that my continual questioning of this call, and my merciless denigration of myself in the process, had served a purpose. As painful as it was, it had held back the greater pain of realizing that the deep call of my heart, and the Church that was seemingly so integral to my identity, were at odds with each other. And suddenly there was no solace in either one! This pain was deep.

Was this gift a burden I was called to bear, my cross for life, a divine exercise in frustration? While I wasn't sure where it was going to go, over the weeks that followed, as I continued to process this prayer experience, there were some things that became crystal clear. God was not bound by the rules of any institution, not even the Roman Catholic Church. I knew this—of course I

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knew it—but there had been times over the past eight years when the cannons that had been drilled into me, seemingly from birth, caused me to question myself. Besides that—what do I know? The Church has been established for millennia, and it has been run by men who had far more education than I did. In addition, I had assumed, and had been taught, that the Catholic Church had been instituted, or at least intended by Jesus, as his continuing ministry in our world.

Yet even in the midst of the pain there were times when I had this fleeting sense that it would come to fruition. And as crazy as it seemed to me, I found some peace in that.

In 1995 I felt that I had an answer to my prayer. I was hired as the Family Minister at Corpus Christi Church, a very progressive church that many considered to be the last stop on the Roman Catholic Train. This was a church that was alive! They walked the talk of social justice and carried that social justice not only to those in need outside the church, but within the church as well. Everyone was invited to the Eucharistic Table; they believed that the sacraments should be open to all people and consequently married same sex couples; they believed in the ordination of women, and although they could not ordain women they had women in positions of leadership on the altar as well as ministering within the community. I knew that while I may never be ordained in the Roman Catholic Church, I could be actively involved in ministry at Corpus Christi.

Then in June of 1998 I was contacted by the religion editor of our local newspaper. He was doing an article on the ordination of women through the lens of various religious traditions, and he wanted to interview me on my call and what my experience was like as a Roman Catholic woman. After the interview I was scheduled to do a noon Communion Service, and he and his photographer tagged along. The story was scheduled to appear in the religion section of the Friday newspaper in a couple of weeks. Imagine my surprise when I pulled my newspaper out of the tube

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on Father's Day, flopped it open, and saw a big picture of me at the altar holding up the Eucharist, front and center on the front page! "Oh my" I said, "I guess the Holy Spirit wants this to be front page news." It was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. There were conservative watchdogs in Rochester who made it their business to keep the Vatican informed of anything and everything that happened at Corpus Christi Church. I was sure a copy of this article would be expedited to Rome.

A few short weeks later that was confirmed. August 13, 1998 Fr. Jim Callan, our pastor, was called into the Diocesan office and advised that the bishop had received a letter from then Cardinal Ratzinger, calling for his removal as pastor of Corpus Christi as a result of three things. These were: 1) everyone was invited to receive Eucharist, 2) we were marrying same-sex couples and 3) women were in leadership positions both at the altar and in every aspect of ministry. I'm sure the Vatican assumed that if they removed the priest, the community would fall back in line. They were wrong! The community organized. There were 1,200 people who came that night to a meeting at church, and they were radicalized. They held rallies, prayer marches, wrote letters, organized an education series and worked with the media. Over the course of the next four months, Mary Ramerman, our associate pastor, was fired, they brought in a new priest whose job was to bring the community back in line with Rome, and on December 13 they fired six of us. Corpus Christi Church went from being a vibrant community that had 2,500 worshipers every Sunday, to having 200 people in the pews. But from the ashes of Corpus Christi, Spiritus Christi was born, and with it brand new possibilities.

As this community formed we found a new joy that, after the despair of the dismantling of Corpus Christi, the assault of being told we had excommunicated ourselves from the Roman Catholic Church, and the deep pain of seeing something so beautiful reduced to ashes, had seemed beyond our ability to comprehend.

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We found an unimagined freedom from the narrowness of the hierarchy of the Roman Church. We were celebrating without fear of being shut down, yet we realized there was one aspect of our practice that we were not fully living: women were in leadership roles but were not yet equal because they were not yet ordained.

Realizing that our Catholicism and its sacraments were near and dear to our hearts, actualizing this was not a simple matter. But slowly our journey began to find a path to ordination for women that honored who we were at our core. Mary Ramerman, who was now the pastor of Spiritus Christi Church, learned of a Bishop in California who had just ordained a woman, and she sought him out. While Bishop Peter Hickman was not Roman Catholic, he was ordained via a strain of Catholicism that had broken with the Roman Catholic Church in the late 1800s as a result of the introduction of the concept of papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council. The group of bishops who broke with Rome referred to themselves as Old Catholic, as they were relating themselves to the institution of the Church that was pre-Vatican Council I. They have a valid line of apostolic succession and most notably, when Mary Ramerman went to Orange, California to meet Bishop Peter, she reported that his community of St Matthew practiced and honored the very same things that Spiritus Christi did. Clearly, this was the right path for Mary Ramerman, but was it right for me? Unlike Mary, I was a cradle-born Roman Catholic, and while I had always been more of a Cafeteria Catholic I just wasn't sure this was the path for me. For so long I had said that I didn't feel called out of the Catholic Church to pursue ordination, but now I found myself "kicked out" of that very same Church. I had learned and accepted that there was Catholic life outside of the Roman Catholic Church, but I was struggling to figure out if this was my path. Bishop Peter was coming to Spiritus Christi Church, so I wrote to him about my call, and my uncertainty, and asked to meet with him one-on-one.

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Our meeting was on a Friday after my noon communion service. Bishop Peter came to the service, and afterwards we went to lunch. We talked freely for quite some time. Bishop Peter explained his own journey and I shared mine. As lunch progressed he turned to me and said “Well Denise, I’ve read your call story and your letter, and as we’ve talked it is very clear to me that your call to ordination is genuine. It is also clear that you have a tremendous amount of support from your faith community. Now the decision is yours—the door is open. Will you walk through that door?”

Suddenly I had an out of body experience that brought me to four different points in my journey. I remembered my experience with John White, the spiritual medium. He had ended his message to me with the words, “A time will come when Jesus will hand that staff to you and you will have a decision to make. Will you accept it or not? The choice will be yours.”

Before I could even ask myself if this was that moment or not, I was transported to another moment in my journey when I was talking with my advisor at Colgate Rochester Divinity School. I told her that Bishop Peter was coming to town, and I was wondering whether this was meant to be my path to ordination or, as I had assumed for years, if I needed to wait for the possibility to present itself in the Roman Catholic Church. She had advised me to return to my original call: “Are you called to reform the Roman Catholic Church, or are you called to minister to the people?” I had immediately countered, “Well, when you put it that way, it’s very clear. I’m called to minister to the people, reforming the Church simply comes from the fact that the path to ordination is blocked for me.

As I sat with Bishop Peter the memories were coming into my awareness rapid-fire. I recalled a friend who told me she had a dream about me. In her dream I was trying to scale the walls around a purple castle. She told me there wasn’t any visible means to get in, but I was determined. Over and over I would try to climb the walls, I would fall back down, get up and try again.

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She said my knees were all bloodied and I was in a lot of pain, but I just kept trying, over and over again.

Finally, I remembered being with my spiritual director years previously. I had been questioning my call to ordination by mercilessly interrogating myself and my motives. My spiritual director looked me right in the eye and said, "Denise, how many more times does God have to say *yes* to you before you stop questioning it?"

In these few moments at the table with Bishop Peter I had traveled across my life, while he had no way of knowing where I'd been. Suddenly he looked at me and said, "Denise, we're in the presence of the Holy One right here and now. The hair on the back of my neck is standing up straight and look at the hair on my arms." As I looked back up into his face he said, "I call moments like these 'Divine Visitations.'" I was astounded, and I finally said "YOU feel God's presence! You have no idea where I've just been!" From that moment on I've never questioned that this was the right path for me.

My ordination to the priesthood on February 22, 2003 was one of the happiest days of my life. All of my life I had felt this calling so deep within my soul. I had struggled to understand what it was, finally named it, spent all kinds of energy denying it, finally embraced it along with the pain of assuming it would never come to fruition, and now I was living it! Just days before my ordination I woke up one morning with a song in my heart. As I wiped the grogginess from my eyes I realized the song I was singing was "Every day with you GOD is sweeter than the day before! Every day I love you more and more, more and more and more. And when I go to sleep at night time tomorrow's what I'm waiting for, cause every day with God is sweeter than the day, sweeter than the day, sweeter than the day before!" My soul and my spirit were carrying the joy within me, even when my body and mind were sleeping.

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In preparation for my ordination I was intimately aware of the women who have blazed a path before me, and those who were to come behind. I wanted to honor the sisters on who's shoulders I stood, so I asked Rev. Christine Mayr-Lumetzberfer, Rev. Kathy McCarthy, Rev. Giovanna Piazza and Rev. Mary Ramerman if I could use some aspect of their ordinations (a song, a reading, a prayer, etc.) within my ceremony, and honor them in my program. Rev. Kathy McCarthy (the first woman that Bishop Peter Hickman had ordained) had immediately told me, "You have to dance!!" I argued that unlike her, I was not a liturgical dancer, but she told me that liturgical dance is not about dance—it's prayer that involves movement and song. At her insistence I danced to the song "Spirit of the Living God, Fall afresh on me." I knew that if I danced I was not going to be alone up there, so I asked my daughters, two of my closest friends and their daughters to join me in this dance. These were the women that had walked this journey with me. They had felt my tears and shared in every one of my joys! And so we danced.

Years previously I had a dream about being in an "upper room" standing around a round table with other women, all in albs, celebrating Eucharist together. As I stood at the altar the next morning for my first Mass I asked my sister priests to join me, and we concelebrated together. At first people questioned me: "Denise, this is your first Mass—the first time you will be celebrating the Eucharist. Are you sure you want others at the altar with you?" In other words, are you sure you want to share the spotlight? My answer: Unequivocally YES! As women we don't walk our journeys alone, and acknowledging, thanking and involving other women in our moments of joy never diminishes us—it only amplifies the joy and reflects the Holy Spirit. My ordination is not about me, it's about the movement of the Holy Spirit in our world. It's about God creating a way where there is no way. It's about standing in solidarity with those who came before and those who will come after!

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In the weeks that followed, every time I celebrated the Eucharist people told me I looked so natural, like I'd been doing this for years. "I have," I'd say, "right here," as I'd point to my chest. That little girl who sat in the pews and had watched every move of the altar boys, had also watched every move of the priest. I knew the Eucharistic Prayers by heart and I often wondered why the priests looked so bored while they read the words, or why they panicked and stopped midstream when they turned to the wrong page. I remember thinking to myself, "This is such a beautiful prayer, why aren't they praying it from their heart?"

After my ordination I realized I had never felt more fulfilled in life. I had a beautiful family, terrific friends, and I served in a community that I loved. I always assumed I would be at Spiritus Christi until I retired, but that assumption changed in October, 2008. I was out on a medical leave, was one-week post-surgery, and despite having had major abdominal surgery, on that particular day I felt better than I had in years. My daughter stopped by to see me that night and as she came into the room she said, "Oh my God, Mom—you look fabulous! You look years younger, like you looked when I was in high school." While I felt really great, it was surprising to me that she could see it. After she left I turned out the light and began to pray. "Loving God, thank you! My life is so full and I am so blessed! I have a great husband, a beautiful family, terrific friends, and I love being a priest! But God, what am I going to do? I only have seven weeks left of my break." I stopped myself short—break? I was out on a medical leave, and I suddenly realized that perhaps it was time for me to move on. I loved my work, but the amount of stress I experienced at Spiritus Christi was becoming too great and it was impacting my health. I started to cry, "God, what am I going to do?" The answer was immediate. "Start a new church." My response was sassy. "Oh, right God—just start a new church, like that's so easy! And where, pray tell, would I begin this new community?" Immediately I heard, "You've grown up your whole life in

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Fairport—there are people on the East Side, closer to home, that will never find their way to Spiritus Christi. But they also need to be fed.” I spent the next three hours in prayer and tears, going around and around with God. Every time I raised an objection I would have a vision or hear an answer. I fell asleep that night feeling like Jacob who wrestled with the angel all night long.

My plans to stay at Spiritus Christi until my retirement were just that—my plans! Clearly God had something else in mind. I left my full-time position as Family Minister at Spiritus Christi Church on May 17, 2009, and that very evening, with approximately twenty to twenty-five friends and family, we celebrated the Eucharist in our family room. This was the very first mass of what became Mary Magdalene Church. From the outside looking in, one might think I had jumped off a cliff—leaving a full-time position in ministry to begin something brand new with seemingly nothing, yet there was so much peace in my heart that I knew this was the right thing.

By December, 2009 we found a building in East Rochester that had formerly been a credit union, with ample space for us to gather. As I said to the community, “Church is not about the building, it’s about the people. We can create a sanctuary anywhere if we carry the spirit in our hearts.” When the town was concerned about changing the building’s zoning to public assembly because the parking lot was small, I said, “You don’t understand. We’re very small—so much so that we’re creating a B.Y.O.C. church.” They asked me what a B.Y.O.C. church was. “Bring Your Own Chair!” And so, in place of pews we had chairs of every type imaginable. Everything from stacking chairs to plastic lawn furniture, but it’s amazing what you can do with a few well-placed curtains and some room dividers. I often saw the look of pleasant surprise when people came in for the first time, and I loved to say, “Welcome to Mary Magdalene Church! We don’t have much but all the other churches in town are jealous; they have their stained-glass windows, but we’re the only church

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in town with a vault and a drive-through!” This building at 401 Main Street in East Rochester served us well for more than three years, when the opportunity presented itself to move six blocks down Main Street to share space with Trinity Lutheran Church.

Trinity was struggling financially, and their congregation was quickly dwindling. While we had shared love, laughter, faith and sorrow in our make-shift church, when we moved in April 2013 we were excited to move into a “real church.” I knew it might be complicated to share space with another community, but this was sacred space, where the faith, love, prayers and intentions of others had been lifted-up for years, and that spirit already graced this sanctuary. By the time we moved in, Trinity’s numbers had dwindled to only six to eight people at their weekly liturgies, and within a couple of months they discontinued their liturgies altogether.

As Trinity began moving toward the decision to disband, we began to think about the possibility of owning the building. In order to seriously consider this as an option, however, we needed to bring it to the community. We set up a meeting immediately after Mass on Sunday, July 13, 2014. It was a hot summer day and the front doors of the church were opened wide. Five minutes before Mass was to begin, we were all shocked when two mourning doves flew right into the sanctuary and perched on a window sill in the front of the church, just over the front door. They remained in that window until just after my homily, at which point the female swooped right down the center aisle and perched on the banner behind the large cross hanging on the altar. I assumed she would fly back to join her mate as soon as I invited everyone to join me at the altar for the consecration. On the contrary. She remained right there, just over my right shoulder, for the remainder of the liturgy. After Mass, as I stood at the lectern to begin the meeting, I announced that the only agenda item we had for our gathering was to discuss the possibility of pursuing the purchase of this church building. I looked up at the dove over my shoulder,

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and the one in the front window of the church, and said, "Does anyone have any questions?" It seemed pretty clear to all of us that we had the blessing of the Holy Spirit.

Our community has felt those blessings in numerous ways over our time together. While we are not large in numbers, with an average Sunday Mass of fifty to sixty people, we are very welcoming and inclusive, and what we lack in size we make up for in enthusiasm, commitment and generosity. In fact, the neighbors who have lived next door to the church for thirty-plus years have frequently told us that even in its heyday, this church has never been as full of life and activity as it is now.

Between pastoring Mary Magdalene Church, having an active social and family life, and providing child care for my grandchildren two days a week, my plate was very full. The last thing I anticipated was adding another hat to the many that I wear. But as is so often the case in my spiritual life, just when I think I've "arrived" God has something else in mind.

In May 2016 I was invited, at the suggestion of Frank Krebs, the Presiding Bishop of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion (ECC), to be a part of a team of five women to address the issue of Women in the ECC at the upcoming synod. It was a huge undertaking, for while we all knew that the ECC espoused the equality of all, and certainly supported the ordination of women, we also knew that inherent in everything from language to ritual to practice there has been an internalization of the patriarchy and clericalism that was a part of the Roman Church. One does not leave an institution with such a significant history of oppression and expect that we are now free from the *'isms* that were a part of its history. Throughout our preparation for synod, our keynote, and workshops, there was one very obvious area where women were not represented, and that was in the episcopacy. There were no women bishops! While there had been two occasions in which women were among those nominated for an episcopal position, neither of them had been elected.

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As I prepared for the synod I was anxious. I began to feel God working within me in ways I was very resistant to. You see, within the ECC several people had told me over the years that they could see me as a bishop, or that the ECC needed me as a bishop. Every time it was raised I immediately and vehemently responded, “No way! No how! Look elsewhere!” I had absolutely no interest or desire. That was in part because I couldn’t imagine how I would have the time (and I was not willing to give up anything else in my life), and partly because over the years I had been privy to some of the political struggles within the ECC, and I was averse to politics in church. Two of the guiding principles of Mary Magdalene Church, when we formed, were transparency and accountability, as I felt that when these were lacking there was a high probability that politics would come into play. I had watched some of the struggles within the ECC, especially between the more egalitarian principals that were a part of the founding of the organization, and those factions which had a very clerical bent and were focused on authority and “power.” I had too much experience with this ugly side of religion from my days in Corpus Christi to tolerate any of it. In fact, for a long time I questioned my desire to remain connected to this organization. But there had been a rift within the ECC a few years previously, and those more clerically focused had broken away. Since that time I’ve experienced the ECC as a much more healthy organization, and one that I have highly valued.

At the end of the 2016 synod it was clear that there was a strong movement among those gathered to see women within the Episcopal Council, and Bishop Francis Krebs announced his intention to see a woman elected and ordained as bishop by the end of 2017. The group of women who had been invited to be part of addressing the issue of women in the ECC at the synod continued to meet in the months following, and I knew it was just a matter of time before those who had previously nudged, suggested, and urged me in this direction would again begin to beckon. I was

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prepared with all the excuses I could think of, until one day when I experienced a voice within me that startled me. "Denise, you have not once brought this to me in prayer!" Suddenly, I realized how true that was. Every single time someone had come to me, my response was a quick, knee-jerk reaction. I had not even allowed the suggestion to get inside of my awareness. I had never seriously considered it. I had never once asked God if this was a part of my call. Even as I began to bring this to prayer, my prayer was much more of an argument with God about how full my life was. I didn't have time, and without adequate time I would not be the best option for the Communion. But just as fervently as I had held this at arm's length, God began to work within my soul.

As I prayed I recalled something that had happened many years ago, when I was working at Corpus Christi Church. I was walking across the parking lot from my office to the rectory for a staff meeting when a bird, in fact a cardinal, whizzed by me so low that I actually ducked, and instantaneously the question popped into my head "I'm going to be a cardinal?!" Instantly I thought: "No, not a cardinal but a bishop." I remember shaking my head in disbelief, but I quickly disregarded it as a strange passing thought. At the time I had thought it was utterly absurd, and not only impossible but additionally incongruous with what I had come to believe to be my call, and I forgot all about it, until many moons later. I was sharing with my spiritual director this movement I was experiencing within me to consider being open to the call to be a bishop in the ECC. At one point in our conversation I was pensively looking out the sliding glass door when I spotted a cardinal perched on the limb of a tree in her back yard. Suddenly this memory came flooding back, and as I shared it with Dijana I felt chills go down my spine.

As I continued to process where I was feeling led in my spiritual life, I had a conversation with a friend about it, and she directed me to the experience I had had when I visited that spiritual medium who told me that Jesus had a staff for me. "You know,"

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she said, “the staff is a symbol of a bishop, not a priest.” I did of course realize it, but I had been trying to hold that realization at bay.

In the Fall of 2017, an episcopal opening was announced in the ECC for an auxiliary bishop to serve as an assistant to Bishop Francis. I was not only nominated, but within thirty-six hours I had received the endorsements of people from different regions of the United States. On Dec 11, 2017 the results of the election were announced. I had been elected to the position of auxiliary bishop. Interestingly, that same week was the nineteenth anniversary of my being fired as Family Minister at Corpus Christi! What had seemed like such a dark day, a day I assumed would mean I’d never again be hired to work within a Catholic Church, had actually led to the opening up of possibilities beyond my imagining.

As I prepared for my episcopal ordination I was forced to deal with my distaste for some of the symbols of office. Given my experience with the spiritual medium, it is probably a given that the crozier was easy for me—it is the symbol of the shepherd. It also became a very special symbol as my husband, who loves working with wood, made it for me. The pectoral cross was also very easy—I wear a cross almost every day. Of course it is not nearly as big, but as the pectoral cross is only worn when vested in liturgy, it is very appropriate. In addition, my parents wanted to gift me with this symbol. The symbols I struggled with were the ring and the miter. My community, however, decided to give me the ring. They wanted it to be a symbol of their love for me and indicated that I would “carry Mary Magdalene Church with me wherever I went.”

The Miter, however, was a whole other bailiwick. I was very opposed to it. I saw it as an imperial symbol and a symbol of distinction, and no one could give me a spiritual meaning for it that was satisfactory. I said on several occasions “You’ll never see a miter on MY head!” It got to be a running joke between myself

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and my assistant pastor at Mary Magdalene Church, Rev. Philip Benier. In my sacrilegious humor I frequently said, "There will be no pointy hat for me!" One night as he and I were texting, he said something to me that he had not said before. "Do not disdain the symbols of office, because those symbols are greater than you and convey a continuance with the historical Church. In those symbols of office people find meaning, an anchor." These words stopped me in my tracks. I had to let them in, and as I did, as is so often the case in my spiritual journey, the Holy Spirit used this time to help me look at some things differently. As I prayed about it I remembered two things. The first came to me immediately—in fact I remembered it as soon as I read Philip's text. It was an experience that a dear friend and sister priest, REV. Giovanna Piazza shared with me. When she was ordained her mother gave her a gold-plated chalice and paten. Giovanna said to her mother, "Mom, this really isn't me!" Her mother replied that the symbolism of the chalice was not for her. "It's for the people in the congregation. When you hold up that gold chalice they can see how it shines, and they can see their own reflection."

The other memory that came to me was an experience I had shortly after my ordination. I was celebrating the noon mass one Friday, and when I came into the chapel I noticed a young woman I'd never seen there before, and she was crying. I wondered what had brought her in today, and imagined that she had maybe lost a grandparent, or had just gotten some bad news. At the sign of peace I sought her out, and the very first thing she said to me was, "I'm sorry. I can't stop crying. I've never seen a woman vested before and celebrating Eucharist." She went on to say that she was a photography student at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Then she added, "During the homily I started crying even harder. My photography project right now is to photograph someone in uniform, and I suddenly realized you were in your uniform!" As this memory returned to me in prayer I realized something very significant. If I refused to wear the miter, would

I be denying women the opportunity to see a woman fully vested for office? I would not be able to explain to people why I'm not wearing a miter, and how would they interpret that for themselves? Would some question whether or not I was "equal" to my male counterparts?

Yet again, the Holy Spirit had opened my eyes through the words of a trusted friend. Yes, this symbol is greater than I, and in it people find meaning. I also realized that it isn't what I wear or don't wear that is important, but how I wear it! The fact that it would be a woman wearing this miter would already speak volumes about how we are reimagining the Church. I finally settled on a couple of things. First, that if I was going to wear a miter it had to be feminine and humble! I immediately contacted the woman who had made my chasuble for me fifteen years ago—Charlotte Barnard, who is a beautiful artist. As she was living in Florida, she involved another friend, Eileen George, and my miter beautifully matches my chasuble with pink and purple hues painted within it. Secondly, I realized it was extremely important that I be vested with the miter for the consecration. It needed to be clear that this was not a "second-tier" ordination. And finally, I realized that when I'm with other bishops who are wearing a miter I need to wear mine, but when I'm alone, unless requested by whatever community or individual I am celebrating or serving at the time, I will not don the miter. It is my hope that within the Episcopal Council we will have a conversation about this, and that we will jointly decide to take off our miters—but I will need to wait until we are able to process this together. (Leave it to the first woman bishop in the ECC to change the dress code!)

On Feb 9, 2018, two days after my sixtieth birthday and just two weeks shy of my fifteenth anniversary as a priest, I was consecrated a bishop. While I had fought against this call for many years, as I lay prostrate before the cross I knew with every part of my being that this, in fact, was right where I was supposed to be, and I was humbly filled with peace.

Since that time, I have had several experiences that have shown me the significance my consecration as a bishop has had for other women. The most striking experience was in Puebla, Mexico. I had accompanied Bishop Armando Leyva and Bishop Francis Krebs on a trip to Mexico to meet some of the individuals who were considering becoming a part of the ECC. We stayed at a retreat center run by nuns. When we arrived the first night Bishop Francis went in first. He began conversing with the sisters, and one of them asked if I was his wife. Frank chuckled a bit and said, "No, this is Bishop Denise. She's our newest bishop in the ECC." I could see among the sisters a look of both surprise and excitement as they spoke quickly with Frank. When it was time to leave, Mother Olga gave a new stole to Bishop Armando and Bishop Francis. How sweet, I thought to myself. Then another sister came out carrying a beautiful white onyx ciborium. They were thrilled to share this beautiful gift with me and I immediately knew this visit had been very special to them. As women engaged in ministry, I'm certain they had never imagined that they would experience a woman priest, much less a woman bishop, and I believe they identified with me as a kindred spirit.