

Growing up Roman Catholic, it was obvious there was a clear delineation when it came to gender in the clergy. Boys could grow up to be priests; girls to be nuns. That was that, and I didn't really question it.

Pope John Paul II published his apostolic letter regarding women's ordination, "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis," on Pentecost in 1994, while I was attending an all-girls Catholic high school. My education was an incredible one that encouraged girls to achieve great heights. We were told we could do anything: be an astronaut, be President of the United States – anything.

Except, as I learned in my "Women in the Church" class – we very explicitly could NOT be priests. We were required to read "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis." (It made enough of an impression, I still have the copy we received then). In a curriculum that otherwise encouraged us to explore our own spirituality and understand who we were as Catholic women, we were taught that the leader of our church said women could not participate in priestly ordination – solely on the basis of our gender.

I read every word with growing disbelief and indignation. The reasons seemed preposterous to me. The leader of my Church was claiming that because Christ chose only men as his Apostles, which the Pope claimed "did not proceed from sociological or cultural motives peculiar to his time," and because the church had considered exclusion of women a "perennial norm" in the ministerial priesthood, that women could not be ordained. He went on to say that women were not lesser than, with the argument that because the Virgin Mary wasn't an Apostle but still really important in the faith, women were "absolutely necessary and irreplaceable". And this "judgment (was) to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful."

Okay, maybe Christ had chosen only male Apostles. I couldn't agree with the argument that wasn't at all a product of his time. He had women in his inner circle, even if they weren't officially "Apostles." And a "perennial norm"? So just because we've always done something this way, it isn't wrong and shouldn't change? After those arguments I found the claim that women are necessary and irreplaceable in the faith

rather insulting.

So women could be anything, do anything - except what I had come to see as the most important thing. We were barred from acting “in persona Christi”, from acting in Christ's stead as the leader of His Church. I just couldn't understand why.

Sometime in the next year, I began to feel called to serve God more deeply. I began to consider the only path of Holy Orders open to me as a Roman Catholic – to join the sisterhood. I ended up taking a different journey. But I can't help but wonder how my life would have been different had the ministerial priesthood been open to me when I was seventeen.

When I found Saint Matthew's, I discovered a place that affirms the calling of women to the priesthood. Women lead us in celebration of the Eucharist, preach the Gospel, *live* the Gospel – as exemplars of the love and compassion of Christ. They are validly ordained in apostolic succession.

Here, I have found myself called back to service. As an altar server (a role my childhood church would not allow girls to fill), I have elevated the consecrated grape juice side-by-side with the celebrant during the doxology. On one occasion, while doing this, I had a profound vision of Michelangelo's Pietà. Here I was, a *woman*, cradling what we, as Catholics, believe to be the physical presence of Christ in my arms.

My high school, where I learned Roman Catholic women could not be priests, installed an exact replica of the Pietà on campus this year. Maybe it's a sign.