

*Sightings* 9/7/06

The Pittsburgh Twelve and Catholic "Fringes"  
-- Julie Byrne

In July, aboard a boat sailing Pittsburgh's Monongahela River, three female bishops ordained twelve women to the priesthood and diaconate. The bishops traveled from Germany as part of Roman Catholic Womenpriests, a group that advocates lifting the Roman ban on women's ordination. The candidates gathered from all parts of the U.S., saying that being among the "Pittsburgh Twelve" -- their nickname echoing the similarly ordained "Danube Seven" of 2002 -- meant fulfilling their true vocations to God and church.

But the candidates had no illusions about what reaction would follow. After the ceremony, Roman Catholic officials said that the ordinations were not recognized, and, moreover, that in taking a public position against church teaching, the Pittsburgh Twelve had effectively excommunicated themselves.

The immediate context of the story was well addressed by the media. Since Vatican II, wrote Michelle Boorstein, "many people who have watched the debate about women's roles in the Catholic church say the Pittsburgh ceremony is part -- albeit on the fringe -- of an unshakable movement for women's equality in leadership" (*Washington Post*, July 30).

The wider historical scope of groups like Roman Catholic Womenpriests, however, remains unmentioned. Long before Vatican II, hundreds of small Catholic groups courted excommunication from *Roman* Catholicism in order to follow what they believed to be *true* Catholicism. Always they sought valid ordination of their own priests and bishops; always they said it was possible to be Catholic apart from Rome. If the Pittsburgh Twelve are the "fringe," this fringe has more of a history than we thought.

Traditionalist groups on the right -- such as the small breakaway church attended by Mel Gibson -- are only part of the story. The "independent Catholic movement" -- a tag used by American participants for their moderate-to-left groups -- dates to eighteenth-century disputes with Rome in the Dutch See of Utrecht. The Utrecht version of Catholicism, or "Old Catholicism," spread after Vatican I, arrived in the U.S. at the turn of the century, revived after Vatican II, and morphed into the independent Catholic movement of today.

Independent Catholicism in the U.S. currently includes at least 150 jurisdictions, most with somewhere between one and five churches. But they vary widely, ranging from the large, historic Liberal Catholic Church International, to the smaller, well-organized Catholic Apostolic Church of Antioch, to formerly Roman Catholic congregations like Spiritus Christi (Rochester, N.Y.) and the Imani Temple (Washington, D.C.). Many, including all of the above, ordain women. Independent Catholics add at least 100,000 members to traditionalist Catholicism's approximately 100,000 in the U.S. Additionally, the Polish National Catholic Church, whose bishops were originally consecrated by Old Catholic bishops, serves another 30,000 Catholics not in communion with Rome.

This history puts groups like Roman Catholic Womenpriests in a tiny but enduring tradition of Catholicism outside Rome that is much broader than advocacy of women's ordination. Scholars and journalists have overlooked these groups, however, for reasons that are not particularly compelling.

First, the numbers are small, and second, the history is chaotic. True enough. But fascinating stories can rise above shrimpiness and jumble: the harbouring of hundreds of former Roman Catholics, including priests and nuns; the trajectory of the Church of St. John Coltrane, now part of the independent African Orthodox Church; the stint of Irish singer Sinead O'Connor as an independent Catholic priest; and the defection of Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo just weeks before the Pittsburgh ordinations. Milingo, a Zambian in good episcopal standing, announced he would join the Imani Temple, which, after his own heart, makes alliance with Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church and permits clerical marriage. Milingo has said he will live in Washington with his wife, whom he married in a Moon-officiated wedding in 2001, and continue his healing and exorcism ministries.

The third reason follows from frequent reactions to the Milingo story: independent Catholicism is full of crazy people and crazy scenarios. But this reason does not hold water. What religious group is not full of craziness? Not to mention that one person's craziness is another person's faith. Enough said.

The fourth reason why Catholics outside Roman jurisdiction go unnoticed is that most of us -- scholars, reporters, and general public alike -- have gotten used to assuming that Catholic means Roman Catholic. This is understandable, since Roman Catholicism dwarfs all other kinds. But it is inaccurate, even for practicing Roman Catholics, whose communion includes over twenty non-Roman Catholic churches, such as the Maronite, Coptic Catholic, and Melkite Greek Catholic churches.

Meanwhile, if we remember that "Catholic" is a name hotly contested among Roman, traditionalist, and independent Catholics; critical for other Catholic churches in communion with Rome; essential for Anglo-Catholics and Continuing Anglicans; and even increasingly self-identifying for a variety of Protestants, our accounts of Catholicism will start to reveal the broad -- if not quite *universal* -- appeal that its many manifestations have generated for centuries.

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