

Class Presentation
4/28/15 – Elsie Hainz McGrath

Does anyone here know who Erma Bombeck was? Her *shtick* was writing helpful hints for women in humorously wise prose. She had a syndicated newspaper column, wrote books, and was literally a household name throughout the 70s, 80s, 90s. Not a feminist, not an activist, not an academic. But last week I came across this quote from Erma Bombeck, and I have to admit I couldn't have said it better! In a nutshell, hers is the message I want to share with you today.

We've got a generation who were born with semiequality. They don't know how it was before, so they think, 'This isn't too bad. We're working. We have our attache cases and our three-piece suits.' I get very disgusted with the younger generation of women. We had a torch to pass, and they are just sitting there. They don't realize it can be taken away. Things are going to have to get worse before they join in fighting the battle.

And this was said in the 90s. And I believe things are *still* getting worse. But Roman Catholic women who are being licitly but illegally ordained as priests, are not sitting on our torches or letting them go dark. We are offering a new model of ordained ministry in a renewed Roman Catholic Church.

When I was 16, I preached my first homily. I don't remember why the teenagers were invited to preach, and I never did know why I said "yes." It was totally out of character for me to draw any attention to myself, and yet I jumped at the chance to preach! I think, in retrospect, this was my first missed awareness of my purpose in life. I don't remember what I preached about, either, but I do remember that after I had written it my mother read it and told me it was "too Catholic." So I took it to my very Protestant pastor and asked his opinion. He said it was fine. With shaking knees, I proclaimed it to the tiny congregation. It would be roughly 50 years before I ever got a similar chance.

From the moment we are asked to believe that Eve was a rib removed from the side of Adam we "get" that "theology" is based in the body and we who are females are at a disadvantage! I told my mom, when I was a mere 2 or 3 years old, that I wished I was a boy because boys get to do whatever they want to do—like leave the house every day and go to work in a different place, with different

people, doing different things. Not washing on Monday, ironing on Tuesday, mending on Wednesday, shopping on Thursday, and cleaning on Friday! Puleeze!

But I followed in my mother's footsteps until I was nearly 30. Because that rib, once removed, became an object, quite separate from God's original creation: MAN. Man was the norm of creation; woman never quite measured up. Everything that was—that IS—unique about her is seen as, somehow, defective and suspect. *Man* is given the divine sanction to name her, and he will dictate how she is to see herself and the world. *He* will define who woman is.

I am not a cradle Catholic. I actually chose to become one, which gives you a clue to how attuned to life I was when I married, at the ripe old age of 17! I especially loved that there was *no such thing* as an unanswered question—not even *WHY are women less than men?* – which was *always* answered in doublespeak anyway, AND the “creator” of this hierarchy is *always* HE. As a Catholic, I was not expected to figure things out for myself; just accept the answers given and obey the rules. For a person who grew up eager to please because **being good meant being loved**, pre-Vatican II Catholicism was a perfect fit.

Within ten years of my becoming one, however, things were looking rather gray in my black-and-white church. Vatican II was taking hold, and I opted out. I had given up “thinking” when I chose Catholicism! Much easier to stay at home on Sundays anyway, having four little ones to mother by now. They were all dutifully baptized, and dutifully enrolled in the parish school, but my own involvement consisted primarily of going to Mother's Club meetings, baking cakes, working a booth at the parish picnics, and hosting a group of rambunctious little boys as a Cub Scout Den Mother. Because rambunctious little boys are part of a woman's responsibility. Once she has taught them to be more respectable, they are taken away from the “den” and given over to the guidance of their “manly” fathers.

Every woman in every society has experienced a life of powerlessness to some degree. Women who buy into their second-hand humanity are truly pathetic, and truly the worst enemies of women's equality this world has had from its beginnings. We need to challenge those bastions of male superiority—the churches, synagogues, mosques—because it was religion that wrought all this and it is religion that continues to intrude into the lives of people and browbeat them into little boxes of black-and-white sins. **At the very least**, we here, in these

United States, *must stop submitting* to the overt sexist language within our liturgies. If we are not openly standing up for our equal rights in equal rites, we are in collusion. Silence is tacit consent. Walking away is apathetic resignation. Ignoring is ignorance.

Institutional religion, particularly and especially the Church of Rome, is the power behind society and societal norms—in every nation, in every culture, in every government. Their arrogant suppression of any important female mythic figure, and the attendant loss of female power, corresponds not only to the reality of the lives of many women, but to the reality of all peoples whose histories have been obliterated by their oppressors. Patriarchy obstructs spirituality within us and outside of us. We must find a way to mainstream **the divine feminine** into this universe within which women are actually living their lives. It really is simply a question of *recognizing* that **she has been there all along**. Let's actually *read* the volumes of Wisdom literature that are in our Catholic Old Testament!

I rebelled when I got fed up with being poor. Went to work outside the home (yes, an anomaly in the 1960s). Began to see life from a whole new angle. Then my husband and I were invited to a Marriage Encounter weekend that literally saved our marriage. And we were back in the fold! We leapt, head over heels, into *everything* that promoted our newfound romance with religion and the tenets of Vatican II. We belonged to prayer groups, planning groups, ad hoc committees, and archdiocesan commissions. We were initiators and directors of Engaged Encounter in St. Louis, and heavily involved and invested in every marriage preparation and marriage enrichment program/movement of the times. We read the works of the Vatican II theologians, spent hours in theological conversation with priests who were suddenly among our “best” friends, and searched for a parish community that would welcome both us *and* our talents into their midst.

We were, in fact, in “on the ground floor” of church reform during those years of the 70's and 80's. It was a heady time of blossoming lay leadership, and we became recognized leaders in sacramental marriage within the local church. But when I tried to expand my reach, I was met with clericalism and intellectualism. “Not qualified,” was thrown at me from every avenue of “professional” leadership I tried to pursue. Obviously, the life lessons of marriage were *better* known and *better* taught by *celibate men*. And I got angry.

So I got a job at Saint Louis University, took advantage of their free tuition for employees, and began my college education. Earned my first theology degree at the advanced age of 53. Then picked up Catechist Certification from the Archdiocesan Paul VI Institute, where I was presumably “trained” with my husband to become a permanent deacon, but in truth, *I trained* my husband. When he was ordained, and I was left sitting in the pews, I got mad again. The ludicrousness of that injustice lit a flame inside of me that failed to ever be extinguished again. I accepted the torch.

I enrolled into the Master’s of Preaching program at the Dominican’s Aquinas Institute, once again letting my employer pay my way; this time the Redemptorists at Liguori Publications, where I was happily working as the managing editor of the catechetical and pastoral studies department.

My husband died two years later, when I was 59. For the first time in my entire life, I was alone. I took some time off from school to get my life back in order after that trauma, and eventually came to realize that **I absolutely loved being alone...** being my own boss... being fully responsible *for my own choices* for the first time in my entire life—and recognizing that with such “power” came *real* freedom. I went back to Aquinas, and earned my Master’s degree in the same year as the famous Danube Seven decided to do something *besides* “buy into” the system. They found themselves a bishop and got ordained.

Two years after that I had a health crisis that left me unable to do much of anything for a year—the year that I turned 65. So I retired, retreated completely into making sure my parish would survive the Strategic Planning that had been implemented by Archbishop Rigali. Rigali was transferred, Pope Benedict inflicted Archbishop Burke on St Louis, and we were all locked out of our parish while our pastor was in the hospital recuperating from surgery. After thirty years of continual ministry, both volunteer and paid, and continual rubbing of elbows and sharing of theologies with the cream of the crop of local clergy—including primarily diocesan, Augustinian, Jesuit, Marianist, Holy Family, Redemptorist, Franciscan, and Dominican—I quit. Cold turkey. They could take their church and shove it.

Except—silence is tacit consent. Walking away is apathetic resignation. Ignoring is ignorance. The torch burned. I only lasted 5 months before walking into the only

church in this archdiocese where I knew I could find a home—the social justice parish of St. Cronan’s. I became their director of the Catechumenate. And it was good. But it wasn’t right. It wasn’t enough. It wasn’t a church of equals, regardless of how hard it tried to be. It was still a Roman Catholic patriarchy.

Then Bishop Patricia Fresen came to town. Suddenly, I saw a new heaven and a new earth—or at least a new church! I had found a bishop! I enrolled in the formation program for ordination as a Roman Catholic priest. But was it reason enough to pursue ordination, that certain knowledge I had that I *could* do it? Especially in light of the public exposure it would bring to me? Did this constitute a “call”?

Patricia compared her own journey to the one she had been a part of as a native South African—the abolition of apartheid. I came to compare mine to one that had preceded me in my own nation—the suffragettes who won women’s right to vote. This fight was one that my own generation was, for the most part, ignorant of. We females of the 50s got burned by sitting on torches we failed to take up.

It was my discernment on pursuing ordination, *contra legem*, that led me to the realization that this was not just about me—no more than apartheid was just about Patricia or the right to vote was just about Elizabeth Cady Stanton. It was, in fact, not about me *at all*. It was about that damned rib. It was about patriarchy, my great-granddaughters, justice, Christianity, the oneness of the universe and every living thing. It was *that huge* – and *because* I could do it, I could *not* do otherwise.

“Here I am, I am ready,” I told Patricia in November of 2006. And one year later, on November 11, 2007, I was ordained a Roman Catholic priest in St. Louis’ Sukkot Shalom (Shelter of Peace), the Jewish Central Reform Congregation, alongside my colleague, Ree Hudson, who now resides in Sedona. We were the 21st and 22nd RC womenpriests in the United States, the 32nd and 33rd in the world. And Archbishop Raymond Burke made us international news.

A quick recap, for you who were not following St Louis... or Roman Catholic scandals in 2007. We are not welcome to be ordained in a Roman Catholic facility, of course, and certainly not in the cathedral. So when we are given an ordination date, we must scour the area and find ourselves a venue. Ree and I found CRC,

the synagogue, after having looked at a few other facilities and not feeling like they were “right.” The rabbi and her congregation welcomed us with open arms, and we will always feel very much at home in that beautiful shelter of peace which I call “my synagogue.”

Having a date and a venue, we sent a letter of information to Archbishop Burke on October 1, including a notice that we would be issuing a press release on October 15. We were quickly summoned to the chancery for a meeting, but when we arrived we were ushered into a room with a canon lawyer. No Burke in sight. Following our inquisition, we received our first written correspondence from the archbishop—a letter delivered to our respective front doors by a process server. We were warned to not go ahead with this “simulated” ordination. We sent out our press release, as promised.

Now the archdiocese resorted to absolutely vile monarchical tactics. They threatened Susan, the rabbi, with what essentially amounted to excommunication from all things Catholic—the interfaith committee she served on, the classes she taught at Catholic institutions in the city, admittance into any building controlled by the archdiocese... She and the Board for the synagogue responded by welcoming us and our bishop with tears and a standing ovation, while the Jewish congregation organized the feeding of the 600+ endangered attendees and joined the interfaith orchestra and singers who performed at the ordination liturgy.

The process server waited out the ordination, then served us with yet another threatening letter as we exited the sanctuary following the services. Burke made sure to also serve up this threat of excommunication letter to our bishop, Patricia, by now a permanent resident of Germany! We were given a month to “recant.”

Before our month was up, we held our first Mass in our newly-rented space—the chapel at First Unitarian Church, across the street from the synagogue. The room holds 100, but on that First Sunday of Advent it held a standing-room-only crowd of nearly 200. Then, on the Second Sunday of Advent, Rabbi Susan was invited to lead a Vespers Service at St Cronan’s. A quick phone call from the chancery reminded the parish that its building wasn’t theirs; it was archdiocesan property, and the rabbi was not welcome inside it. So the services were held outside, in the middle of the public street, in a freezing rain, with over 100 attendants. Sister Louise co-celebrated with Susan.

Sister Louise was summoned to the chancery. They had pictures of her, gasp, laying hands on us and receiving communion from us. They didn't know, I guess, that she also baked the bread that fed her and the other 600+ who came to the open table in the synagogue. She was quickly displaced out of the archdiocese, after being fired by her parish and the Catholic institutions of higher learning at which she taught.

So was the Archdiocesan Director of Interfaith Affairs, formerly a good friend of mine, and also of Susan's. And I was kicked out of an audited class at Aquinas by the very President who had, not so many years earlier, proudly handed me my Master's Degree. Ree and I were both invited to never again show our faces in St Cronan's, by its cowed pastor, because he too, of course, was summoned to the chancery, and likely ordered to "control his women." And Liguori Publications removed my name and bio from everything I had written for them, and stopped promoting even "best sellers."

Our date for recantation came and went, and soon the process server was once again at the front door of our homes. This was yet another threat letter, which I more fully understood after I looked up the strange word I had never heard of before then—contumacy. Briefly, it means I was being a brat of a bad girl. So bad, in fact, that I had relinquished my "right" to recant by not recanting in a timely manner. I had no recourses left! And, sure enough, a few weeks after that the familiar process server rang my doorbell and handed me a Decree of Excommunication. An identical decree was even literally hand-delivered to Bishop Patricia, somewhere in Germany!

Alas, the last communication that was personally received by us from the archbishop was the letter threatening to take us to court for daring to publicly call ourselves Roman Catholic priests! Before this could happen, he was on his way to Rome—and our 15 minutes of fame was over. It had lasted for 9 months—from the time of the letter to the archbishop written on our namesake's feast day of October 1 until the end of June when he was called to his lofty reward in Rome. If you are looking for a good press agent, there is none better than Raymond Burke. Amazing, in that entire 9-month period, he was also the one person who never personally talked to us. We never met!

But we graced the covers of the National Catholic Reporter, Riverfront Times, and the St Louis Magazine, were feature stories on all the local TV newscasts, did live interviews on all the local radio stations, and were called on for comments every time Burke opened his very big and vocal mouth. A UPI stringer lived in St Louis and talked to us regularly. My cousin, who was booked on an overseas cruise before we'd set the ordination date, picked up a UPI bulletin release of the grand event on board the ship and proudly passed it around for all to read.

I am not familiar with the book you have been reading in preparation for today, but I do want to stress up front that the ordaining of women into our movement has nothing to do with "gender reversal" and everything to do with gender equality. The truth is that those mainstream churches which have been ordaining women for years, some even a century or more, still do not put them on a par with those men who are ordained. Mostly innocently, these women have been *shookered* into the system. They find themselves trying to push through a stained glass ceiling.

Further, those women who opt for ordination in what are today called "alternative Catholic communities" are opting out of the system. They are not *Roman Catholic*. They are enjoying a modicum of equality in their priesthood among the male clergy, but they are flying under the radar of any real change. Because to the Church of Rome they no longer matter, they have become just more invisible nobodies.

Roman Catholic womenpriests are *not* invisible to Rome. We are scary. We are the enemy. We are the threat to their bastion of male superiority. We are reclaiming our power as equal parts of the Body of Christ and equal members of the human race. How? Why? Because we are validly ordained in the Roman Catholic line of apostolic succession.

On May 29, 2008, the people of the world were further introduced to the "sins of the Fathers" as they attempted to decipher an official Vatican decree, published in that day's *Observatore Romano* which was headed: "Regarding the crime of attempting sacred ordination of a woman" and went on to say that the woman and the ordaining bishop are "absolutely and universally majorly excommunicated"—meaning nobody can lift that excommunication except the pope.

[Footnote: This decree was actually written in December of 2007, concurrent with all of the worldwide hullabaloo that was being precipitated from the St Louis chancery. Yes, I do believe Burke was the ghost writer...]

and... One month later, he was promoted out of St Louis, all the way to Rome and to the office of the highest judicial authority behind the pope—Prefect of the Apostolic Signatura. Soon after that he was named a Cardinal.

Then, in 2010, another official Vatican document hit the world by storm. It said that pedophiles were gravely disordered, their sins “on a par with” women priests. Though not quite on a par with, because pedophiles are not excommunicated. Pedophiles can repent. Pedophiles are not “trying to destroy the church,” a statement attributed to Pope John Paul II following the Danube Seven ordinations.

Still, the little community dubbed Therese of Divine Peace has not missed a Sabbath celebration since its inception on December 1, 2007. Parish priest, a role that I had envied without ever logically “getting” that I was called to, is what I basically now am—*sans* a church, room and board, wheels, spending money, and full medical coverage, and pension of course. We are *all* worker priests, meaning we support ourselves. We are not supported through our priesthood. Our numbers have grown, from 7 in 2002 to 32 in 2007 to nearly 200 today. Yes, fewer than 200 women—worldwide. And the only ones who visibly and dramatically scare the Vatican. Not even the world’s new darling, Pope Francis, can embrace us.

Because, in a sense, it could be said that we *are* trying to destroy the church, though this is improper semantics because WE are the church. We only want to reform the hierarchy, renew the face, reclaim our rightful and divine roots.

I mean, if tomorrow the doors swung open and Francis said, “Come on in,” many of us would decline the invitation. Because our purpose is not to be assimilated into the good ole boys club and become carbon copies of our sister clergy in other denominations who are either buying into the system or breaking their backs in continuing to push against that stained glass ceiling. **Our purpose is to rebirth the church of Jesus Christ**—the one where all were *truly* welcome, *truly* equal, and

truly fed, no questions asked. The one where *all* are sacraments of God and no sacraments are *denied* to anyone.