

Denise Donato  
Spiritual Autobiography  
Oct 20, 2017

For as long as I can remember I've felt God's call in my life. As a little girl, I can remember feeling drawn to the altar. By the age of ten I knew the words to all four of the Eucharistic prayers. I would test myself, staying a breath ahead of the priest. I couldn't understand why they had to read it out of that book. If I knew the words, shouldn't they know the words by now! And, it was a beautiful prayer, why did they look so bored reading it?

As a teen, I didn't understand why none of the boys in my fellowship group were thinking about becoming a priest. It's such a wonderful opportunity! I expressed frustration that women didn't have this same opportunity. "You can be a nun" was the standard response. "I don't want to be a nun!" I'd reply.

Clearly the call was there. I could express anger that it wasn't an option for women in a general sense, but despite the fact that I felt a deep longing in the pit of my soul, it seemed sacrilegious to name it for myself. Instead, I often ended my prayer with the thought "If I was male and celibate I'd know what this means..." I never allowed myself to complete the sentence and name the call that was so intense, and yet so elusive. The fact that I didn't meet those two basic qualifications led me to assume that I must be sorely mistaken. I mean the Catholic church said God only called men to the priesthood, and they must know what they're talking about, or so I thought. Yes, I was a "good, Italian, Catholic girl" who tried not to question the rules!

But that all changed in October of 1987. As a part of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius retreat. I was praying on Exodus 3, the story of Moses and the burning bush. In my prayer journal I wrote "If I was male and celibate I would know that I'm being called to the priesthood.." As I completed the sentence I felt a bit of panic- I couldn't let those words sit there all alone. I still remember penning the qualifier that followed "... but I'm neither so that could not be the case." Having finally named I couldn't take it back. But even so, I would spend years telling myself that I most certainly was arrogant and misguided if I believed it. After all women need not apply!

I spent the remaining 28 weeks of my retreat trying to understand the Call. I had just come face-to-face with what I had been avoiding. The burning bush was alluring and terrifying at the same time. While one part of me longed to understand, another part of me kept trying to deny the Call. I questioned myself, the authenticity of the Call and my integrity. I often asked myself: How can this be? Why would God call me to something that is impossible in my church tradition? Why would God call ME? Am I that full of myself- that arrogant that I would believe I am worthy of this Calling? I experienced a profound sense of shamefulness and was more fully aware of my flaws than ever before. Yet, the more I tried to push it down, the more insistently this Call came up within me.

It culminated in an image I had one day in prayer. I experienced Jesus giving me a beautifully wrapped gift. I felt great excitement to open it up, and then immediately began to sob uncontrollably. I suddenly realized that the gift inside the box was the priesthood, and that, as long as I remained in the RC church, I would never even be able to unwrap the box,

much less try it on for size. Yet what was I to do? My Catholicism was deeply a part of who I was and I didn't feel called outside of that tradition. I suddenly realized why I had spent the past several years trying to deny my call- it was easier to deal with the pain of believing so poorly about myself, than it was to deal with the deep-seated pain of realizing the call of my heart was at odds with the church of my baptism. My faith tradition was as much a part of my DNA as my Italian heritage.

I decided I needed to find another way to live out this call. In 1990, when my youngest daughter started Kindergarten, I went back to school. I wanted an MDiv, but I knew I would never be happy working in a church office watching the priest have all the fun. My plan was to get my MSW, go into mental health, and later add a Masters in Divinity. In my eyes, our psychological-emotional journey and our spiritual journey go hand in hand. This would just have to satisfy that part of my soul that longed to be involved in ministry.

Then in 1995 an opportunity came along that felt like it had been designed just for me. I was hired as the Family Minister at Spiritus Christi Church! I loved my work there, working with families, preparing couples for marriage, working with the LGBTQ community, leading a communion service every Friday, preaching some Sundays.

While I wondered if it was worth it to complete my MDiv degree, Fr Jim Callan encouraged me. "You want to be ready if the opportunity is ever there." In addition, I began attending Call to Action Conferences, discovered Women's Ordination Conference and became a part of a group of RC women who also felt called to the priesthood. As a result of these connections, a reporter with the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle contacted me for a story he was doing for the religion section of an upcoming Friday edition on women called to ordination in various faith traditions. Imagine my surprise when instead of this story being hidden on the back page of a Friday paper, I pulled my Sunday paper out of the mailbox to be greeted with a huge picture of myself, standing at the altar at Corpus Christi Church, lifting the elements during a communion service. Front and center. Right on the front page of the paper on Father's Day, June 21, 1998. No one who picked up the newspaper that day could possibly miss it! My breath caught in my chest, but then immediately I thought "I guess the Holy Spirit wants this to be front page news!"

Some might say this was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. Two months later, Bishop Matthew Clark received a letter from Cardinal Ratzinger (then the Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) calling for the removal of Fr Jim Callan as pastor of Corpus Christi Church. The letter cited three infractions: 1) marrying same-sex couples, 2) inviting everyone to communion and 3) women being seen and treated as equals in leadership and prayer. We had known that Corpus had its watchdogs, and those watchdogs had been communicating with the Vatican for years. My newspaper article was certainly not the only issue. In fact, earlier that same year Fr Jim Callan had published a book about Corpus Christi Church. He wrote about each of these practices in that book and called for the Church to become more inclusive. The newspaper article was just the icing on the cake for the watchdogs.

Suddenly the bottom fell out! Over the next four months the diocese systematically dismantled Corpus Christi Church. First, they removed Jim Callan, then they fired Mary Ramerman, then they brought in a new priest, and when even this didn't work, 10 days before Christmas they fired six of us from the staff.

But what felt like an ending really became a new beginning. They could empty the pews of Corpus Christi Church, but they couldn't extinguish the spark of the Holy Spirit, and Spiritus Christi was born. (We went from being the "Body of Christ- Corpus Christi" to the "Spirit of Christ- Spiritus Christi.")

As Spiritus Christi began, we realized that we were fully practicing two of the three issues that had prompted the sanctions from the Vatican, i.e. we were already marrying same sex couples and at every liturgy we invited everyone to communion, but there was still work to be done in the area of women. While we acknowledge women as equals and involved them in leadership there was still a glass ceiling that hadn't been shattered. (In the church we call it a stained-glass ceiling!) In the summer of 2000, we hosted a conference entitled "Women's Ordination: How? When? Why?" and invited people involved in Catholic reform to present workshops. As I was on the board of WOC, I knew about Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger, a woman in Austria who was training women for the priesthood, and had vowed that at the end of this program she would find a way to get these women ordained.

During the conference Mary Ramerman and I pulled together Christine, Sister Maureen Fiedler host of the radio program Interfaith Voices, Andrea Johnson from WOC, Charlie Davis (now with the ECC) and others. We vowed to work clandestinely to try to find a bishop willing to ordain a group of women. We stayed in touch with one another through email and over the phone, and met in person at conferences and events. Shortly after that Mary learned about Bishop Peter Hickman from a story in the National Catholic Reporter after he ordained Rev Kathy McCarthy in Palm Desert. Once I had a chance to meet with him, it was very clear to me that this was the right path for me.

Mary was ordained in November of 2001, I was ordained a deacon in April 2002 and a priest Feb 22, 2003. In July 2002, Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger had found a Roman Catholic bishop and she was moving forward with ordination. She invited me to join her and be ordained on the Danube River with them. I expressed to Christine that I supported her 110%, but I knew that wasn't my path. I had deep peace in my heart that I was meant to move forward with Bishop Peter Hickman for my ordination.

When I was ordained in 2003, Christine came to Spiritus Christi for my ordination. Before the ceremony she confided in me that she had recently been consecrated as a bishop. She was not yet at liberty to publicly reveal this information, but she wanted me to know. I suddenly realized that in a matter of hours, when she would "lay hands on me," she was doing so not only as an ordained priest, but as a bishop!! I've always felt a bit like I have "dual citizenship" in the ECC and the RCWP!!

I was ecstatic living out my priesthood at Spiritus Christi Church. I felt as though a part of my soul was made whole in ordination. It was not as if I was a half a person beforehand, and it was certainly not that I felt better than others!! In fact, I don't see ordination as "setting one apart," but more like designating someone within. It was more that I felt that, one of the calls of my heart, had finally come to fruition. We are all called in various ways and I see my call to marriage and motherhood as equally significant as my call to ordination, but I never thought I'd experience ordination in my lifetime!

I loved my work at Spiritus Christi, loved the community and loved being a part of a team, but in October of 2008 my heart was stirring deeply again and I began experiencing a

call to begin a new community. I was on a medical leave due to surgery, and one week post-surgery I began to realize that I felt better and more energized than I had felt in years. That night, as I was preparing to sleep, I was thanking God for the amazing blessings I had been surrounded with in life. I began thinking about how much I loved being a priest, when suddenly I began to experience a movement within me that led me to realize I was not to stay at Spiritus Christi. I can remember this prayer as clear as day. I was experiencing Jesus telling me that he wanted me to start a new community. "Are you crazy?!" was my immediate response! "You're asking me to leave a full-time, well-paying job in ministry to do wHaT?!" I spent the next three hours, arguing, taunting and being outright sassy with God!! Tears were rolling down my cheek faster than I could wipe them. Every time I put up an argument, God would give me a picture that reminded me of events from my past that showed me an "answer." Finally, after three hours I fell asleep spent, hoping that when I woke up the light of day would erase whatever indigestion I must have been experiencing! Unfortunately, not only was it not gone in the morning, the intensity only grew over the weeks and months ahead.

My last day at Spiritus Christi Church was Sunday, May 17, 2009. That very evening, I held Mass in my living room for a group of 25-30 close friends and family. This marked the beginning of Mary Magdalene Church. Some came that night just to support me, others were there because they wanted to be a part of this new adventure. On Sunday June 14 we held our first public Mass at 5:00 at Mountain Rise Church in Fairport. Within a few months, I realized if this was to grow, we needed to find a space for prime-time Sunday morning and in December 2009 we began having Mass at 10:00 on Sunday mornings in an office building in East Rochester. When we were looking at the space I needed to go to the town zoning board to get the space approved for public assembly. At first, they were very concerned about such things as parking for "all those cars" on Sunday morning, etc. I kept telling them we were very small and just starting out. Finally, I said- "I don't think you understand how small we are. We're just starting out and we literally have nothing. In fact, we're starting as a 'BYOC' Church. 'Bring Your Own Chair!'" (And I wasn't kidding! For the first year or two we literally had people bring us any chairs they could spare- lawn chairs, white plastic outdoor chairs, folding chairs, stacking chairs, etc.)

The building was a former bank, but once you walked inside the door (despite the eclectic assembly of chairs) you knew you were in a church. Of course, I used to kid that the other churches in East Rochester were jealous- they had their stained-glass windows, but we were the only ones with a vault and a drive-up! Shortly after we started we took the doors off two tiny side by side storerooms and hung curtains to use those as the sacristy. The following Sunday someone said "Wait- we have a confessional now?" I replied- "We're a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church- who needs a confessional when you have a drive-up window?"

I started Bible Studies and book discussions. We had coffee hours, pot-luck dinners and game nights. We started a Children's Liturgy of the Word once a month and family Masses and I began meeting with families of children who wanted to make their first communion. On our 1<sup>st</sup> anniversary we had six children receive their First Communion. We were a full-fledged church.

In April 2013 we moved into our true spiritual home. Trinity Lutheran Church (located just six blocks up the street from the bank) approached us to see if we wanted to rent space

from them to ease their financial burden. Shortly thereafter Trinity voted to disband and asked us if we wanted to buy the building. I'll never forget Sunday, July 13, 2014. After Mass we were going to have a Parish Community Forum to make a decision about pursuing this offer. As it was a hot summer day, the front doors were open, and 5 minutes before Mass two mourning doves flew into the sanctuary! As Mass began, the doves were perched in the large red windows right over the front door, but just as I finished my homily and sat down the female flew right down the center aisle and perched on the rod supporting the banner that hung behind the large cross at the altar. I thought for sure she would fly back to her mate once I invited everyone around the altar for the Eucharistic Prayer, but she stayed right there watching over my shoulder for the rest of Mass. I still get tingles running up and down my spine when I remember it! As we began our Forum meeting I looked at the dove over my shoulder, and the one in the front window, and said "So... do we have any questions about buying this church?"

Mary Magdalene Church is a vibrant active faith community. We've added a labyrinth behind our parking lot and an outdoor sanctuary that an Eagle Scout built for us using a slab of green granite. Our neighbors tell us they've lived next door for 35 years, and they've never seen so much activity at this church, not even when it was in it's heyday!

That brings me to today. I have been a part of the ECC since its inception, and through the years people have repeatedly told me I would make a good bishop, or that I should consider becoming a bishop. My answer was always adamantly "No way, No how!" Family is very important to me. Phil and I have four grandchildren and we are very active in their lives. Between that and Mary Magdalene Church my life is very full and I'm quite content. I had absolutely no aspirations for anything more! But the Holy Spirit began working on me about a year and ½ ago when I was invited, at the request of Bishop Frank, to be a part of a team to talk about women and the ECC at the synod in Dallas in 2016. I often identify with the "reluctant prophets" of old, especially Moses and Jeremiah. I resist God's urges, argue with God and try to convince God that someone else would be better qualified. Just as I've done many times before I tried to talk God out of it, but God is very persistent.

When I shared the discernment process I was in regarding the call to be a bishop, a parishioner said to me "You know Denise, I think the Holy Spirit has been grooming you for this throughout your life." I humbly must admit that this is exactly what the Holy Spirit has been trying to show me, while I was trying to talk her out of it! I have been with the ECC from the start. I understand not only what the words of the constitution say, but the intention with which they were written. I have connections outside of the ECC which I believe can help us integrate more fully with others of like mind and heart in ways that can increase our visibility, our credibility and our connections.

If I am chosen to serve as a bishop, my prayer will be the same prayer I pray each and every time I'm preparing to preach, or visiting someone on hospice care, or even needing to listen to someone who might be angry with me or upset about something. "Loving God, help me to remember that this is not about ME. Help me to get out of the way and let you shine through. Help me to say and do what you would have me say and do."