

Josh Mangelson: Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Karin Peter: Welcome to Project Zion Podcast. I'm Karin Peter, and this is No Filter, where we have conversations about sex, gender and faith, and today, women and ordained ministry. My guest today is Diane Whalen, who lives in Western Washington. She's married and has a family, and Diane is a certified spiritual director. And she's part of the Roman Catholic Womenpriest Movement, which is gathering support here in the United States and other places. Diane was the first woman priest ordained in this movement in my area in Washington State. That took place in 2010 and so Diane is a Catholic priest. I'm sure our listeners will be a bit confused by this, just as I was when I was first introduced to the women's Catholic priest, to the Roman Catholic Womenpriest movement. Get that correct. So first, hi, Diane.

Diane Whalen: Hi Karin!

Karin Peter: It's really great to be here recording with you for Project Zion. We've tried to make this work a couple of times and had some technical issues, so thank you for visiting with me again.

Diane Whalen: It is a delight to visit with you, Karin.

Karin Peter: So, Diane, when I first met you, I had never heard of women Catholic priests. So I'm going to ask you to take a few minutes and it walk us through and explain if you will, what exactly is the Roman Catholic women priest movement?

Diane Whalen: Okay you know, you know, and a lot of people know that the institutional Roman Catholic Church does not believe that women can be ordained as priests. So that's kind of the ground that we were working with. Back in 2002 there had been a group of women in Europe who had been preparing for ordination for a long time. And that was because after Vatican II, which was a convening of all the bishops in the world back in the sixties, in the early sixties. After Vatican II, many of us thought that women would eventually be able to be ordained priests because it's a no brainer. So we were thinking that way. And this group of women had been preparing for several years to be ordained when the church would finally say, sure, this is a no brainer. Of course you are Christ in the world, just as the men are. But they never quite got there. So by 2002 the women realized that things were going backward in that direction. And so they were able to find a bishop who had, he had resigned, but Catholics believe that once a bishop, always a bishop, just like once a priest, always a priest. So they had found a resigned bishop who was willing to ordain them. And so he did that on the Danube, 2002, on the Danube River, out of the jurisdiction of any diocese. Which just happened to work out fine. But these women had been preparing for years. They were ordained with the rite of ordination that was used for the men and believe - and I believe that they were ordained validly, if not licitly. So illicit, not according to the law - because there is a canon law, Catholic law, that says only a man can receive the sacrament of ordination because a man can image Christ and a woman can't.

Karin Peter: So what we have then is a bishop who is still a Catholic bishop willing to do the ordination. The women and the bishop go out on a boat on the Danube River so that no one has jurisdiction. So they're not going to have that technicality impede them in any way. And the ordinations take place for these women who have prepared in the same way that men prepared.

Diane Whalen: And they are prepared academically and in their own formation for priesthood, so their spiritual formation as well as their academic information. These women are prepared for priesthood.

Karin Peter: So that explains where the movement began. How did you learn of it?

Diane Whalen: Way back in 2002 I had been a part of women's ordination conference. I had received their newsletters and had been keeping up with what was happening there. And I actually saw the notice in the paper, in the Women's Ordination Conference newsletter, that said that these women had been ordained and my reaction was good for them. They believe they're ordained as priests.

Karin Peter: So you said they believe they're ordained as priests. Did you believe they're ordained as priests?

Diane Whalen: I couldn't; I wasn't there. I couldn't imagine it because I had experienced and had known a call to priesthood within myself for so long, but allowed the institution to co-opt my own imagination and my own desires - and I believed them when they said, you can't do this. So still, in 2002 I knew that I had a call to priesthood, but I couldn't believe that it could happen.

Karin Peter: So you knew you had a call to priesthood. Let's talk about that a little bit. So, when did you begin to discern or recognize perhaps that you had a call to serve in ministry and that it would be priesthood? Because you are Catholic, you could have been a nun. What made you feel you had a call to priesthood?

Diane Whalen: For me, the foundation of priesthood or any call to ministry is a deep love for God. And when I was in first grade, I was five and a half years old. I had a sister. I was in Catholic school, I had a sister, and I remember seeing an aura around her. Now, it wasn't the colorful, you know, dancing lights business. But I remembered seeing light around her and knowing from my pictures in the catechism that that meant that she was holy, that she was close to God. And I decided right then and there that's what I wanted for my life. That is what my life was going to be about. And that never left me. That's still the way it is. It certainly has changed form, but that's the way it is. That is my desire, the desire of my life. So that was very early on. As I went forward in grade school, still in Catholic grade school until ninth grade, I felt a desire to be a sister because that was the model I had. So I thought that I would be a sister. Then I went to public high school and hormones got going, and I thought, mmm, sisters don't get married. Mmm, don't think that's going to work for me. So I was letting go of that, but the

idea of serving people, which to me is how we express our love for God and how we experience our love for God, that idea just deepened. So I first thought I would be a teacher then I thought I wanted, well, I knew I wanted to be a doctor. Couldn't do the math and science just could not go there.

Karin Peter: Amen on that one.

Diane Whalen: That just wasn't going to happen. But as I continue to be in college and needed to drop out of pre-med because the science and math wasn't there, I asked myself, what do I want to study? Well, what I loved was religious studies. So that's what I did. After college, I joined the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, so spent two years in full time service growing up, learning about life, learning about what service really meant and means. It means giving your life away. And it was hard and I loved it. And I knew that that was a call for me. In the meantime, I am experiencing more and more this call to priesthood per se. I mean, Catholic priesthood. And that kept growing in me. And like I said before, after Vatican II, there was this sense that it was going to happen. It was going to happen - it just hadn't happened yet. So I continued to study and give myself more and more opportunities to do ministry and to study theology and was more and more sure of this call to priesthood - and was articulating that. I was talking about that with friends. So it just grew in me, but I never knew what to do with it because I never felt called out of the Catholic Church. Now, did I love what was happening? No, no, no. But it was that bloom where you're planted business and I couldn't get away from it. My call was to stay within the institution, to do whatever ministry and lots of ministries that I was able to, but not to leave, and yet, to live out some kind of a call to priesthood. So I wound up, I got a master's in social work, did a little of that work, and then I studied spiritual direction and began that ministry. Part of my ministry in spiritual direction was to teach spiritual direction, and I had many, many clergy people of different denominations who were my students during the 13 years that I did this and I saw my call to priesthood as being a pastor to the pastors. And I was satisfied with it. I was fine with it. That's what I thought it was, that, plus doing different ministries, including liturgical ministries, within my institutional parish. I was lecturing. I was cantoring. I was doing small groups. I was really helping people discover their spirituality both within and outside of church. So I was doing all that and happy - I was happy. And I also wasn't looking for, you know, 100 new best friends. But what happened was I felt more and more that I needed to explore what it would be like to (pursue) ordination. And so, actually, go back a little bit. When I was in a master's program for ministry, back in the late eighties, I went through a discernment process, a formal discernment process to ask the question, Am I called to ordination? So I knew I had been called to priesthood; that was that was so solid in me, there was no question. But the question is, am I called to ordination? Am I call to lead a community as an ordained person? And I needed to ask that question because of the way my master's program was set up. If I was going to become a parish priest, a pastor, I would take the track that included administration and those kinds of things that I had really no interest in. So I didn't want to do that if I didn't feel a strong call to ordination.

Karin Peter: So when you say administration, you're talking about the jurisdictional aspect, the legal aspect, the paperwork aspect, all of them.

Diane Whalen: Yeah, I mean, parish administration. So I didn't, that's not my cup of tea, but I knew I would need those skills if I would ever pastor a group of people, not ever imagining how that would ever happen, because I had no idea - how, when, why - anything. I knew nothing. But I knew that that was my question. So I did this formal discernment process with some people there during the first days of this master's program because I had to make a choice. And the answer was very clear. Yes, I am called to ordination as well as being called to priesthood and I thought, damn. Okay. Okay. I will do this. I will take the administration classes. I will take that track on this, not having any idea where that would lead me or what it could possibly mean. But I did it and that was that.

Karin Peter: So you go through the discernment process. And you use sense very strongly that yes, there's no question you are called to ordination as well as sensing your call to priesthood. So what happened then? How did that then lead to where you are now as an ordained priest?

Diane Whalen: I continued discerning and I continued looking around. So one of the things that I explored was the possibility of being an Episcopal priest because that would have been an open road and kind of an easy open road. But that was not where I belonged. Those are the cousins. I love them; they are closely related. They were not me. And so I didn't know what else to do. That was very clear, and I couldn't go any further. I couldn't even get to the Lutherans. So I knew that that wasn't me. Then eventually, 2005, 2004, something like that, I started looking at some other Catholic groups that were populated by people who had left the Roman Catholic institution and we're beginning other communities. So there's the American Catholic Church, the Celtic Catholic Church, the Celtic Catholic Community, those kinds of expressions of Catholicism that were inclusive of women, of gay people, of, you know, just more inclusive. And I started exploring that and they didn't fit. But I was still exploring; I was still in that process and then I was invited to a talk by Bishop Patricia Fresen, who was part of the Roman Catholic Womenpriests. And that was in November of 2006. When I heard her speak, I knew that my life as I had known it was over because there was so much that resonated in me from her story. It's a powerful story, and I knew I would need to pursue it. So I talked with her after her talk. I had a conversation with her and she gave me the most intense, pointed interview anybody could ever imagine. I don't know how long it lasted 10, 15 minutes, but she asked me everything about my call to priesthood, about my academic preparation, about my spiritual formation, about the support of my family, about the support of my friends, about where I was with the institutional church. And at the end of that conversation, she said, Diane, in two years you could be a Roman Catholic Womanpriest, and then I was just in complete shock. I was just in shock then. I really knew my life was over as I had known it. So I applied and began the formation program which for me, took longer than usual because I do a lot of resistance when I'm doing spiritual stuff that's really challenging for me. I just did a lot of resistance. I guess that's enough to say about it. But I did the work. I did my work, and I

worked hard to move through this place of trusting the institution more than myself. I was able to let go of that and to begin to really deeply experience, with a lot of freedom, what it means to answer a call from God, a call. And when I say a call from God, I mean a call from the community. Yes, there's a certain amount of experience of quiet prayer where I feel the spirit moving within me. That's yes, that's one experience of a call from God. But basically I looked at my whole life. And from the time I was a kid, I was a person that people turned to for ministry, for loving, for listening, and that just continued to deepen as I grew and as I was involved with groups, small or big. I was always a priest in the community. I was the priest in that community. And so I really began to trust much more deeply as I did my formation work. And there was writing to do with that. There were conversations around all that. So that's how I moved through that formation process.

Karin Peter: So you've done the work and you've prepared. And how did you know you were ready? And then who ordained you? How did that take place?

Diane Whalen: By the time I was ordained as a deacon, which was a year before. It's called transitional diaconate, which is in contrast with a permanent diaconate, if you've ever heard about that. There are people who are called to be deacons and they make that commitment and that's what they do. I knew I was called to priesthood, so transitional diaconate happened a year before my priestly ordination. By the time I got there, that was the leap across the chasm that you know, there's no return and I knew that. And so by the time I got there, a year before I was ordained as a priest, I knew that this was where I was going. So, what was the second part of your question?

Karin Peter: I asked who ordained you and how that took place?

Diane Whalen: Well, I worked with the formation director and through this discernment, got to this place. There was a bishop who ordained me as a deacon and then when I was ready to be ordained as a priest, the sweet thing is that my mentor throughout my process had been ordained as a bishop, and I had been part of her ordination just a few months before. So Bishop Olivia Doko ordained me in Olympia here, with, I don't know, I could never remember what it was, 250 or 300 or 340 - there was a bunch - a lot of people there, and it was a very joyous occasion. And she used the rite, although with inclusive language, the same rite that is used. And we did it. We did it with the support and the love of people that I know and people who just heard about it and came and celebrated with us.

Karin Peter: So I would assume that women priests are not viewed, are not accepted of course, by the institution and not viewed legitimate by the Vatican. So, what does that say to you as you've served as a Catholic woman priest, as a minister?

Diane Whalen: It's a no brainer that women are prepared. We are able. There's no reason we can't serve. In fact, I think people who are married, which perhaps in the Institutional Catholic Church even, now, that that particular thing will be broken through. But to be a married woman ministering in a community, I wouldn't say of mostly women.

But we have a lot of women. We have a lot of men in our community. But to minister to the people of God, we need the gifts of men and women. They're different gifts.

Karin Peter: So you mentioned your community. You have men and women in your parish, if you will, in your community.

Diane Whalen: We don't call it a parish, we call it a community.

Karin Peter: A community. Well, that resonates with Community of Christ, so we're good with that. So describe that a bit. Your community and what services are like.

Diane Whalen: We began the community, we began having mass the month after I was ordained, So I was ordained in May of 2010. In June, we had our first mass together. We had been gathering from January to just begin to imagine, begin to explore, because this is unknown territory. This is really unknown territory. So we were beginning to explore what it might be like to gather as a community. During that meeting in January, the first thing I did after we kind of got settled and took a little time to be quiet and invite the Spirit of God within us and around us and through us to help us with wisdom. The first thing I said was I talked about my idea of what priesthood is. And my idea of priesthood is that it comes out of our baptism and it is a particular call. But it's not a hierarchical thing, which is different from the way that the institution sees ordained priesthood. But rather, I am a part of this community with a particular role and gifts for that role, preparation for that role, a heart for that role. So I had kind of laid that groundwork, and we talked about it. So when we began meeting for Mass, for Eucharist, it's the regular Catholic liturgy but with inclusive language. And gradually, over the nine and a half years we've been doing this, we have really looked at the theology of atonement, which is that sense, I mean I'm going to simplify it really quickly, but that sense that Jesus had to die in order to make amends for our human condition. We don't buy it. If it ever had any value, that value is long gone. So when we talk about Catholic liturgy in the context of our community and basically in Roman Catholic Womenpriest led communities, most are saying we need to open our hearts more to the tremendous love of God, the tremendous wisdom of God that flows through us as individuals and as communities. And so are the words of the liturgies we craft to say that, so that we can say that together and believe that together. So that's it. Look, it is mass. It looks like mass. It sounds a little different from mass if you're paying attention. But that's what we do. And that's what we've been doing for nine and a half years.

Karin Peter: So our Community of Christ listeners would resonate a bit with that as we don't have a lot of liturgy in Community of Christ, but the prayers that we use over the bread and wine for the sacrament of communion are part of our liturgy. And we did adopt a more inclusive language terminology. So people have the option of the traditional or the inclusive language prayer. So that that resonates a little bit, I think, with many of our listeners. So you're talking about mass and having Eucharist. What else happens in your community?

Diane Whalen: Well we take care of each other. We gather, we have a potluck. Well, let me tell you first, we started off once a month, once a month for mass, and then once a month for a community meeting. But we've always had a potluck, every time we've gathered. Now in the last two and a half years or so, we're now celebrating Eucharist every week, but we have potlucks twice a month just because otherwise it's just too much. But that's one of the things we do. We celebrate sacraments together, so I mean, Eucharist is the primary sacrament. Communion is the primary sacrament for Catholics. We have had the opportunity to do a few baptisms. We've had the opportunity to have several funerals, and we Catholics have the sacrament of anointing, which is a very precious, precious ritual in which we gather the community and we anoint each other with oil for healing. And we've done that communally. And that's something that people call me for. Call Kathleen and me. There's another priest in our community, Kathleen, as well, so they can call either of us or sometimes both of us to go and pray with them. And we always do it in the context of their families or whoever is gathered around them. It's not an individual sacrament unless there's no other way. You know, if it's a hospital visit with no family there. But that's a very precious way that we're able to be with each other.

Karin Peter: So the 2002 was the first ordination to Deacon?

Diane Whalen: No. Well, yes. And those women, because they've been preparing for such a long time were ordained as priests right away.

Karin Peter: Okay, So the movement, then is almost 20 years. Yeah. Yeah. So how many? Yeah. So how many women Catholic priests are there?

Diane Whalen: There's about, I think there are about 240 at this point worldwide. Most of them are in this country, so I'd say maybe 180 or 190 would be in this country. And then the rest are, there are some in Europe. And then there are some. I think there's one in the Philippines. There are a couple in South Africa. And where else? Not sure where all are, I think that's I think that's where we are.

Karin Peter : So do you have gatherings where you can be together for support and sharing and that kind of a thing?

Diane Whalen: We're in regions in this country, and our Western Region has been gathering every year. There are other gatherings. We gather as a national body every two or three years, depending on what's going on in the world. And the bishops that we have, which are worldwide, gather. I don't know how often they gather in person, but they gather on a regular basis. The national ones gather more often, but they have international ones as well. And we have other committees, visioning committees and that kind of thing that gather: different, smaller groups that gather.

Karin Peter: So you were ordained 2010 and we are on the eve of 2020. So in the past 10 years of ordained ministry, what aspect of serving as a priest has been most challenging for you?

Diane Whalen: Most challenging probably is not being sure that I'm doing as much as I want to do. It's I love to be with people I love to minister, and it seems like there aren't enough hours in the day to meet those needs and take care of myself, which is, I think it's an issue that a lot of us in ministry face. That it's difficult and especially as we age, we need to be good role models for our people who also struggle to take care of themselves. So I think that's the hardest thing for me at this point.

Karin Peter: So what aspect of ministry as a priest has brought you the most joy?

Diane Whalen: There are several. I love presiding at Eucharist. I love that. I love preaching. I love visiting people, whether they're sick or whether they're happy or whatever. I love being with our folks. Just listening, sharing, being.

Karin Peter: So before we met, you had heard that someone wanted to interview you for a podcast that was affiliated with Community of Christ. You checked us out before you and I met the first time. What did you find?

Diane Whalen: Well, I checked you out because I had never heard of Community of Christ, and I found that I was confused when I was trying to sort it out. I knew that there was some connection with Latter Day Saints but I couldn't figure out what that was and I could see that you were a progressive community in terms of being inclusive and more progressive theologically. And because I had had contact with Mormon folks, with Mormon families, very lovely contacts through our daughter's high school programs, but it didn't match up too much with the progressive business, so it was just confusing. So when I got a chance to meet you and we talked, that became a lot clearer. But I feel like we're soul sisters because we're struggling to find some justice within institutional religion that is patriarchal, hierarchical and not inclusive. So, like I said, I feel like we're soul sisters, moving and prophetically opening ourselves to be people of justice.

Karin Peter: There are so many aspects of your story that will resonate with many of our listeners, and I'm guessing that some people would like to learn a bit more about Catholic women priests. And so there is a Ted talk that is available that's still out there online. Or you can go to Holywisdomicc.org. That's the website for your community so people can learn a bit more. Any kind of final thoughts you'd like to say to our group of people, many of whom are women who have grown up in a patriarchal religious system and have yearned for the time when they, as women might experience ordination? What are some kind of holy closing wisdom kind of thoughts that you can offer, Diane?

Diane Whalen: I don't know about holy but I can say that this is the moment that we're living in: we have an opportunity. For those of us who have some education, have the exposure to other people who are moving in the same direction, have the support of people who are wanting justice, now is our moment. Now is our moment. If we don't take it, it's going to pass us by. So what do we got to lose? Really. Step into it. Step into it! Just because you don't know what it is. I mean, that was my experience: I didn't know what it was any time I was stepping, but I was encouraged by the people around me. I

was encouraged by the people have gone before me. I mean, in particular all of the strong women who have stood up for justice throughout the ages. So, why not do it?

Karin Peter: Joining that great communion of the saints in this context, the communion of the women saints who have gone before and are yet to come, and a few good men who support us as well. So with those thoughts. I'd like to thank you, Diane, for visiting with us today, helping us navigate through the journey of Roman Catholic women priesthood. And we'll have more conversations I'm sure, in the future.

For our listeners, this is No Filter, part of Project Zion Podcast. I'm Karen Peter. I've been chatting with Roman Catholic Womanpriest, Diane Whalen. Thanks so much for listening.

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