

Three Women “Priests” Excommunicated

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(March 17, 2008) In order to protect his flock from being led astray, Archbishop Raymond Burke of the Archdiocese of St. Louis has excommunicated three women who took part in an ordination of women to the priesthood.

In a March 12 Declaration of Excommunication, Archbishop Burke declared two St. Louis-area women, Rose Hudson, 68, and Elsie McGrath, 69, and a German woman named Patricia Fresen, to be excommunicated.

Fresen, a former Dominican nun from South Africa and the founder of Roman Catholic WomenPriests USA, conducted a would-be ordination of Hudson and McGrath at a St. Louis synagogue on Nov. 11, 2007 in a ceremony identical to the rite of a Catholic ordination.

“The three women have publicly affirmed, by word and by deed, the validity of the ordination of women to the priesthood, in contradiction to the perennial, constant, and infallible teaching of the Catholic Church,” the Declaration stated.

Monsignor John Shamleffer, the archdiocese’s chief canon lawyer, told *The St. Louis-Post Dispatch* that Archbishop Burke had sent three letters to Hudson and McGrath in the last four months asking them to meet with him “to give them the opportunity to recant, hoping that through pastoral means this could be resolved.”

The women refused to meet with him and continued to co-pastor a small faith community and hold worship services every Sunday evening for about 35 people at the First Unitarian Church of St. Louis.

The third woman, Fresen, who lives in Germany, was also excommunicated for formally and directly engaging in the founding of a “new and separate sect” called Roman Catholic WomenPriests USA. She was accused of the persistent rejection of Church doctrine coupled with a refusal to retract that rejection, and the simulation of the administration of a Sacrament. The accusations against the other two women were the same except they were not accused of simulating the administration of a Sacrament.

The women were declared guilty of the accusations “by the commission of the most grave delict of schism, all three of the guilty parties have lost membership in, good standing in, and full communion with the Roman Catholic Church, which bond each and every baptized Catholic is obliged to maintain.”

The consequences for the women include being barred from all parishes and institutions of the archdiocese, being forbidden to take “ministerial part” in the celebration of Mass and being unable to administer or receive any sacraments. They also may not receive absolution from their sins, and they are forbidden to be buried in consecrated ground.

All sacraments administered by the women were declared “utterly null and void” and any direct or indirect participation in their supposed sacramental rites or rites of prayer is strictly forbidden.

This is not the first time women have been excommunicated for attempting to ordain themselves to the priesthood. In 2002, seven women were ordained aboard a boat on the Danube River. Dubbed the Danube Seven, they were later declared excommunicated. According to a spokeswoman for Roman Catholic Womenpriests, Bridget Mary Meehan, there are a total of 53 ordained women in North America who are members of the organization.

In a statement issued on Thursday, Hudson and McGrath said that they “and all Roman Catholic Womenpriests, reject the penalties of excommunication, interdict, and any other punitive actions from church officials. We are loyal daughters of the church, and we stand in the prophetic tradition of holy (canonical) disobedience to an unjust man-made law that discriminates against women.”

The women can appeal the excommunication to Archbishop Burke and if that failed, to the Vatican.

“The situation is sad for the whole Church,” said Archbishop Burke in a separate statement calling for prayer for the three excommunicated women. “It is cause of great concern for me as archbishop. Please join me in praying that both will be reconciled with the Church and that the great harm which has been caused to the Church, with the help of God's grace, will be healed.”

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