

ADVENT THREE, YEAR C, DECEMBER 15, 2024
Reflections on 40 years of Priesthood

Around 1978 Bishop Jack Spong was visiting and confirming at my home parish, St. Peter's in Clifton where I was the Confirmation teacher. Just prior to the service, as Bishop Spong was engaging the confirmands in conversation, he turned to me and said, "So, when are you going to become a priest?" I looked at him dumbfounded and did the only mature thing I could think of doing which was to turn my back on him and walk away. After the service I approached him and asked him why he asked me that and he just replied, "I think that's something you're struggling with. Come see me." And I did.

That is the auspicious beginning that has led me to this moment. When I officially began the ordination process in 1979 women priests and the 1979 Prayer Book were causing a great deal of controversy and division in the church. For those who remember that time period in the church it was a tumultuous time. I was fortunate to be a part of this Diocese of Newark since Bishop Jack Spong and the Commission on Ministry were supportive of women's ordination which made the process much easier than many other women encountered in other parts of our country. In fact, many women came to our Diocese to seek ordination since they were denied that opportunity in their own dioceses.

But just because Bishop Spong and the Commission on Ministry were in favor of women's ordination didn't mean that everyone in the pews were in agreement. When I left for seminary in 1981, my mother received a call from Aunt Dot, the matriarch of St. Peter's, Clifton my home parish demanding, "how could she do this to me." My mother responded "who?" "your daughter" said Aunt Dot. My mother replied, "which one – I have four". Aunt Dot said, you know very well – Beverly – how could she do this to me. My mother asked "and what did she do to you." Aunt Dot responded "she knows how I feel about women priests. She knows I'm against it. Why would she do this to me? Aunt Dot saw this as a personal affront to her and my mom just responded by saying all my daughters are following the paths they choose too.

Fast forward several months and the day I came home after my first semester in seminary was the ordination anniversary of the retired priest of St. Peters, Rev. Louis Louisa who had baptized me and prepared me for confirmation. He always had a service that day and as I slipped into the back pew he was just beginning his reflections. He told those assembled, mostly the old guard, that he was in agreement with Bishop Spong that women should be priests and continued that women had a lot of gifts that men didn't have that they brought not only to the priesthood but enhanced it. He ended by saying, if you don't like it, you can always leave. Yes, Aunt Dot was in church that day and no she didn't leave and yes, she eventually came to accept women priests and me.

When I entered seminary in 1981 there were 15 women in my class of 60 and there was only one female professor at Virginia Seminary, Dr. Marianne Micks who offered her home as a place for the women seminarians to come and freely talk about the trials and treatment we received. It was subtle at times but the sexism and disapproval crept through in many different forms from other students and faculty alike. In my final seminary evaluation with my faculty advisor his last question/statement to me was, "you will be cutting your hair? "Why would I do that" I

asked. Because it's a distraction – my hair was half way down my back. So, I countered are you going to ask all the male seminarians not to grow their hair long or grow beards because, obviously, that would also be a distraction. The discussion abruptly ended and the evaluation was signed.

I was ordained in 1984 and began my ministry as the curate of Calvary Summit. To some I was a curiosity, a novelty, and there was certainly many that were very supportive of me. In fact I found it was the older women that were very supportive of me as most of them were college educated who never had the opportunity to pursue their own careers and they were thrilled to see someone blaze a trail in a very male dominated society and church. But it was also clear that some people were not quite sure what to make of women priests and were struggling in how to deal with me.

Fortunately, the few women clergy in the diocese at the time chose to meet on a regular basis to support each other, offer advice, discuss difficult situations we found ourselves in. Rev. Nancy Wittig and the Rev. Katrina Swanson, two of the Philadelphia eleven were rectors in this diocese. We talked about how we were judged about what we wore – slacks or skirts – we all wore men's clerical shirts as there was no attire made for the women clergy back then. How we wore our hair – short or long. What we would be called was a big discussion as we vehemently opposed the use of the term mother to address us as we felt it was tied to all the patriarchal structure of the church that had kept women down for so long, plus there is a mother superior of the convent.

In 1986 I was called to be the rector of Trinity Church, Kearny. I met the senior warden for the first time the day I moved into the rectory and the first words out of his mouth were, "If I hadn't been in the hospital, they would never have called you.

After that auspicious start, it only got worse. He refused to receive communion from me and arguments were constant. After several months, the rest of the vestry said enough is enough and told him he wasn't in communion with the rest of the parish or me and said he could no longer continue as senior warden - so he left.

I was very fortunate how Trinity embraced me especially when I got married and when I gave birth to my daughter Meghan. The women took great glee in having showers for those occasions and enjoyed telling sales clerks they were buying the sexy lingerie for their priest and then baby clothes for their pregnant priest and how they might have to move the altar to accommodate my expanding pregnancy.

Meghan was born at St. Mary's Hospital in Passaic and she ended up being a C section. After she was born, my OB/GYN remarked that there were a lot of people waiting for her to be born. The anesthesiologist asked if I had a large family and my doctor said, She's a priest and has a whole parish waiting for this baby. I swear to you everyone in that operating room stopped dead in their tracks. During the next several days my colleagues came to visit and the nurses kept remarking that this baby must be very blessed with all the priests coming to see her.

There was no maternity or family policy in this diocese or in the national church so when I became the rector of Church of the Saviour in Denville in 1992, I had to create my own maternity leave policy to be put into the contract. Not too long after I arrived I was washing my dog in a kiddie pool in the church parking lot wearing a bathing suit. There was preparations going on for a dinner later that evening and the whole kitchen crew came outside to witness my washing the dog because they had

never ever seen their previous priest without his collar on and here I was in a bathing suit. It was groundbreaking.

In every church I served it was the first time they had a female priest. Making my way in the community and in hospitals was a constant explanation that I was not a nun and indeed an ordained priest and that's what my collar stood for.

When Meghan was about three she came home from pre school and declared that mommy had a girls job and daddy had a boys job. Trying to explain that wasn't true to a three year old didn't quite turn out until I had to bring her to diocesan convention for a few hours. All the clergy were lined up, vested and ready to process into convention when Meghan tugged on my robes and looked up at me with big eyes and said, Mommy all the boys are wearing the same dress you are. I responded, yes isn't that wonderful.

It is gratifying to see so many women priests and bishops in our church but it is still a struggle for many of us. Even though we have diocesan minimums pay for many of the female clergy over the years has never been commensurate with the male clergy. I am still amazed at people who have never encountered a women priest and yet we still persevere.

I would like to end by telling you the story of this stole that I have. It belonged to the priest who had baptized me, Rev. Louisa, and was given to me by his daughter at my service of institution at Church of the Saviour. It is worn and frayed but I see it as a powerful symbol of all the struggles the women endured and still endure today. But it also a symbol of strength, determination, our faith, endurance and hope in a loving God that is always at our side. My prayer is that I have been a faithful servant of that faith for 40 years and will continue to be as long as I can. Amen.