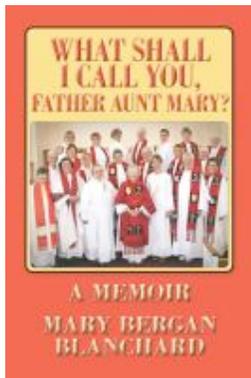


**WHAT SHALL
I CALL YOU,
FATHER AUNT MARY?**



**A MEMOIR
MARY BERGAN
BLANCHARD**



In her memoir eulogy, Blanchard wrote, "The greatest sin of the Catholic Church is its failure to treat women as equals." In 2014, at age 82, contrary to 'males-only' church law, Blanchard was ordained a Catholic woman priest. She states, "Rebelling for its own sake is silly, a waste of time, but gender inequality with its catastrophic results must go. We women priests have taken a major step by leading the church, not leaving it."

What Shall I Call You, Father Aunt Mary?

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**What Shall I Call You,
Father Aunt Mary?**

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The group photo on the front cover was taken at the of the Ordination of ARCWP women on May 24, 2014, in Brecksville, Ohio.

What Shall I Call You, Father Aunt Mary?

**A Memoir
of
A Woman's Journey
into the Roman Catholic Priesthood**

MARY BERGAN BLANCHARD

Association of Roman Catholic
Women Priests (ARCWP)

IMPORTANT WORDS FROM THE WRITER

“If you are going to write this book, you had better explain to the reader where you stand.” I heard it from all my editors. So, I thought about it. For decades, I have been at odds with the church’s patronizing view of women. Canon law and a few Popes have forbidden even discussing reintroducing women clergy, but in spite of that, I have opted to become a priest.

I felt it was my duty.

I decided to reread Garry Wills’ book, *Why I Am A Catholic* and opened by chance to page 285. “One is obliged to differ from the papacy. If that were not true, we would all have to honor papacies that persecuted, lapsed into heresy, or supported despotism. We would have to believe in the many frauds used in canon law to define the papacy. We would still be believing that Jews are cursed and non-Catholics damned. We must differ from some forms of the papacy because:

“The papacy like the church changes.” (Cardinal John Henry) Newman said, ‘In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often,’ ” Wills continues. “The Spirit is perfectly able to steer the church through changes. If she were not able to, the church would never have survived so many divagations, so many dangers, so many disasters.” I flipped back to page 281. Wills states: “The job of a loyal Catholic is to give a support that is not uncritical, or unreasoning, or abject, but one that is clear-eyed and yet loving. Newman describes what happens when – ‘the teaching church cuts off the faithful from the study of her divine doctrines, and requires from them *a fides implicita* (unquestioning trust) in her word, which in the educated classes will terminate in indifference, and in the poor in superstition.’”

Garry Wills, historian and critic, and Cardinal Newman, brilliant theologian, are well respected. I would suggest that anyone sincerely

interested in the Roman Catholic Church read Wills' book. I am not nor do I pretend to be as knowledgeable. However, I do believe that most sensible and fruitful changes in our church have come not from the hierarchy alone but mostly from the laity. History proves it. After all, the hierarchy and the laity are the church.

I began writing my first book *eu'lo.gy* in 1992. My favorite quote is "I think the greatest sin of the Catholic Church is its failure to treat women as equals." It is still my favorite quote, and now, a call to action. I believe that it is my obligation to again welcome women into the church's priestly celebrations.

The time has come.

I have always felt that rebelling for its own sake was silly and a waste of time. Striving to make sensible changes is another story. I love my church and have no desire to go anywhere else.

However, some things need to change.

I'm working on them.

The best way I can defend my position is through the old song, "*It Had to Be You*".

*"Some others I've seen
Might never be mean
Might never be cross
Or try to be boss
But, they wouldn't do

For nobody else
Gave me a thrill
With all your faults,
I love you still.
It had to be you, wonderful you
It had to be you."*

Written by Isham Jones with lyrics by Gus Kahn. Published in 1924.

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To Tyler Callahan (tiesphotography@gmail.com) and Wanda Russell for their photographs.

I have changed the name of only one person. The story as told is as I remember it.

DEDICATION

To family and friends who have lovingly
encouraged me to embrace my calling.

PART ONE

GOD SPEAKS

CHAPTER ONE

YOU'VE GOT TO BE KIDDING!

Monday, June 4, 2013

“Hey, there’s a picture of Mary Theresa Streck in the *Albany Times Union*! She’s going to be ordained a priest, a Roman Catholic priest!

“At last, it’s really happening.”

I kept staring at the picture. Time evaporated. Forget her white hair. In my mind, I was back in the Sixties. There she stood, the way she used to when we bantered. I could picture her years ago, pausing by the door of my classroom in her blue uniform, the same mischievous smile, the energy, the intelligence. She looked the same. And I was the teacher and she was the pupil, but our minds had clicked somehow.

What a blessing, teaching such talented students.

At this moment, I was sitting in Catherine’s apartment, visiting her at the Sisters of Mercy motherhouse, waiting to take her to breakfast. I was yearning for sausage, egg and cheese on a warm biscuit but Catherine was still combing her hair. Or should I say *Sister* Catherine, Religious Sister of Mercy.

To fill you in, I had been a Sister of Mercy for twenty years and left the community over forty years ago. Catherine and I had entered around the same time. She was eight years older than I with a degree in math and drama and a few years of teaching experience at Skidmore College.

Catherine remained in the community and eventually became its president, then lived and worked in the projects in the North End of Albany for forty years. I married and raised a family and pursued social justice in my own way. We had never lost touch, friends for over sixty-three years.

I was a widow. My husband Ed, after a long illness, was gone. The children were settled. I could travel, and I did. Right now, I was mesmerized by the article I was reading, sitting in Catherine's apartment in the motherhouse, waiting to take her to breakfast.

The apartment, a euphemism, was a large room with an adjoining bath.

"Have you been following these girls," I asked as loudly as I could.

She stuck her head out of the bathroom and looked at me, pointing to her ears and shaking her head. Darn. Why do these nuns have naturally curly hair and mine is so straight?

"Where are your hearing aids?" I asked, touching my own ears and pointing to hers. She couldn't hear a U.S. Marine band marching through her apartment without them. Catherine was tall, slender, poised, humorous, eighty-nine, brilliant and semi-deaf.

She plugged in, began drying her hair, and we continued our conversation. "Mary Streck," I said, pointing to her picture. "She's being ordained a Catholic priest next weekend. Wouldn't you know that I'll be back home in Albuquerque. But I'll be here again in October for the community's one hundred fifty years in the diocese celebration. Hmmm.

"Maybe I'll write her. She was such a girl, so dedicated, even at that early age. I'm not surprised."

Catherine and I had discussed the Danube Seven before. Seven devoted women were ordained by an authentic Roman Catholic bishop on the Danube River in 2002. There was definitely apostolic succession, but the bishop had to remain nameless lest he be booted out of the Church.

The movement had grown. Other women had been ordained. They wanted to be included in the Catholic Church as women who were able to perform the sacraments. They were tired of waiting for the Church to make a move. Now, there was Mary, my former pupil, right in the newspaper!

The article was complete and well written, definitely an item. The women priests were valid but, illicit – meaning that the Vatican did not recognize them as priests. However, they had been ordained following the rite of Apostolic Succession by a Roman Catholic bishop and, as far as they were concerned, could celebrate Mass, hear confessions and anoint the sick.

“I wonder if Rosemary has seen it. She’ll be shocked. You know how she always kids me about being Pollyanna, always so optimistic.” Rosemary had left the convent when I did, and settled near Albany. We kept in touch by phone.

“So, finally, here it all is,” I mused aloud.

“Yes,” Catherine agreed, “here it all is. So what do you think?”

CHAPTER TWO

SO WHAT DID I THINK? GOOD QUESTION.

“I’m surprised women’s ordination has come, and right out in the open, too,” I said. “I can’t believe the movement has finally taken root! I’ve been fighting for and writing about it for years.”

“I know. Let’s hope it’s not quelled, or worse, peters out from lack of response.” Catherine leaned over, scanning the paper, combing her damp silver hair. “A bold move on her part,” she continued. “I hope she has a strong group behind her. She’ll need it. Albany is a conservative city.” She headed back to her bathroom with comb in hand.

I stared out the window at New Scotland Avenue, at the huge trees that thrust their branches upward and outward, yearning towards clouds but fated to shade sidewalks and roads instead. Don’t fret, I told them. The birds come and dwell in your hair.

It was a peaceful, suburban Sunday morning. Not many cars. The area was so familiar to me, so comfortably nostalgic. I grew up here. How many times as a kid had I ridden my bike up and down New Scotland Avenue?

It had changed and it hadn’t changed.

Flanking the left of the Motherhouse, the monastery that used to house cloistered nuns was now part of Maria College, which belonged to the Sisters of Mercy. On the right, across Manning Boulevard, the new wings of St. Peter’s Hospital had crept into every available space on the corner.

Very few sisters left to oversee the hospital.

Very few sisters left, period.

Entering religious life was not as popular a vocation as it was when I entered the convent in 1950. Religious orders were disappearing

because of lack of vocations. Dedicating one's life to good works and to God's service was possible outside cloistered walls. The ability to choose one's vocation without the interference of the vow of obedience was an extra enticement indeed.

So, in the late nineteen sixties, many sheep had left the fold, although other sisters had remained in their communities and succeeded in changing old customs.

Actually, there were nuns leading the women's movement back in the eighteen-eighties, but always at the mercy of the hierarchy. The women who left religious communities in the nineteen-sixties had more freedom of choice but, unfortunately, both groups, those in and out of convents, were still excluded from the priestly life of the church.

Up until now, anyway.

"Maybe, some sisters will become priests, Catherine."

"What did you say? I can't hear you."

"Never mind." Stranger things had happened. Why not? Parishes were closing at an alarming rate because of the lack of priests and interest in organized religion. But that should not be the reason why women would be accepted into the priesthood, merely to fill in.

Christianity needed an overhaul and women were just the ones to tackle it. Sisters were already performing a priest's part in pastoral work, running parishes, holding Sunday ceremonies where they gave communion that had been consecrated by a waning cadre of parish priests. The sisters said it themselves, "We do everything but say Mass and perform the sacrament of penance."

I remembered a story that Sister Joyce had told me about her thirty years as a missionary in Alaska. Since there was a priest shortage, the sisters ran several parishes, cared for the sick, performed baptisms and Sunday services, gave sermons and did just about everything except say Mass and hear confessions.

I happened to be with Catherine at the Motherhouse and ran

into Joyce, who was also visiting. “I might not have been able to administer the sacrament of Penance,” she confided to me, “but I certainly heard confessions, though I told people I wasn’t a priest. They didn’t care. We were all they had.

“I remember being in the cereal aisle in a store when a man approached me and spilled out his life history. I listened, standing there with a box of Cheerios in my hand. As far as the parishioners were concerned, we *were* their priests.”

Catherine was now dressed, and was searching for her purse. “You know, Catherine,” I commented, “it’s the ‘second-rate syndrome’ that rankles me. Men are in power and women are servants. Who died and left the male gender the fourth person of the Blessed Trinity? But, now, ta dah, here come women priests!”

I stood up and raised my arms and hands in Churchill’s V for victory.

“Am I going to have to listen to you brag that ‘I told you so’? You always said that you’d live to see the day when it would come about. I must admit I never believed in your optimism. You do surprise me sometimes. But don’t spoil my breakfast. I can’t eat crow and Eggs Benedict simultaneously.”

“I love being right. I just *love* being right.”

She sighed as we headed to the convent’s front door. “I know, I know.”

CHAPTER THREE

I JUST LOVE BEING RIGHT!

We were seated in the restaurant, our food in front of us. Besides my sausage, cheese and egg biscuit, I had ordered a side of fresh fruit. Maybe I could fool my inner calorie counter. I took a small bite of my biscuit, swallowed and sighed. Delicious. Catherine was between forkfuls and began a conversation.

“I heard that when they announced from the altar at St. Vincent’s that Mary Streck was to become a priest, the congregation clapped. She is still welcomed in her church.”

“But not so everywhere,” I interrupted. “The Vatican has forbidden all discussion of women’s ordination. It still wants to treat people the way it did the uneducated hordes back in the Middle Ages. That kind of thinking is long gone, when the church spoke and everyone said yes, yes, yes. The ‘obey, pray and pay’ syndrome. It’s over. The church has to move with the times.” I chewed on another bite of biscuit and finally commented absently, “Why does everyone believe that modern ideas have to be loose or wrong or immoral?”

“You’re preaching to the choir.” Catherine said. “I must admit, though, I didn’t believe that this dilemma would rise to the surface so soon. Women priests are now a fact. They can’t be dismissed.”

“I know.” I answered. “Both you and Rosemary have had dim thoughts about the movement’s success. Waiting doesn’t work. It didn’t work in the Sixties and it won’t work now. How long have we had to listen to ‘Women’s equality takes time’? Well, the church has had nearly two thousand years.”

Catherine’s fork was in mid-air. “I know you believed that you’d live to see the movement come to pass. Rosemary and I never did. Mary Streck’s ordination must make you very happy.”

“You betcha, and, to celebrate, I want more hot coffee.” The restaurant wasn’t crowded and we settled down to our meal and good conversation.

I took a long look at Catherine, savoring her breakfast. She was an enthusiastic cook, fearless, and enjoyed her food. I recalled the time years ago, when we were novices, and she was on kitchen duty. She had prepared a marvelous feast for the community and had finally sat down to her own meal. And she stared at it for a moment, then rubbed her hands together in true glee.

I have that picture framed in my mind.

We’d led such different lives, and yet, what a gift it was to have friends like herself and Rosemary, long-time ‘I knew you as a kid’ friends, friends for years and years, friends that saw one muddle through changes, new developments in behavior and ideas, that one could talk to about everything, *everything*, and never be told to ‘calm down’.

Total acceptance was rare and so, sooo relaxing! Keeping a lid on oneself was draining. I still can get excited when the first humming bird arrives at my feeder in spring. Catherine once told me that it was a good thing I had so many friends because for certain, if I had only a few, I’d wear them all out.

“Well, this movement of women priests,” I said between sips of my hot coffee, “is the icing on the cake. And it would never have come from the church itself. Every worthwhile idea that has ever taken place in the Catholic Church has come from below, usually from the laity.” I drank a bit of my coffee, trying to get at it before it turned cold.

“Not quite every idea, Mary. Consider Vatican II.”

“True, but John XXIII was the exception,” I admitted.

“Catherine smiled as her fork played with remnants of her eggs. “I only hope the group has the strength to go forward, that they are organized enough, that they attract enough media attention.” She

looked up at me and said, “It’s a needed movement in the church. We’ve longed for it and I wish them well.” We folded our napkins and prepared to leave. “I know Mary Streck belongs to an organization. I think I’ll look it up on the Internet.”

“Me, too,” I added. “And I’ll also look it up in *The National Catholic Reporter*. They’re usually on top of everything.”

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ORGANIZATION.

Neither of us pursued investigating at the time. We were too busy talking and my visit was never long enough.

After I arrived back in Albuquerque, after I unpacked and settled in, I poured myself a cup of hot coffee and sat down at my computer, I found the group immediately on the Internet. ARCWP. Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests.

Their web-site was professionally done, and its mission clearly outlined. The group was formed to rewelcome women into leadership roles and restore the right to ordination to them. The poor, the marginalized, the wanderers, and the abandoned – anyone in need was considered a part of their flock. On them, they would concentrate their apostolic efforts.

I was satisfied by the detail, and could not think of any question about or aspect of the ARCWP that was not addressed. Their purpose was to examine and discard outmoded practices of the Catholic Church and replace them with a meaningful liturgy and theology. In no way did I surmise that any member had to swallow a hard party line.

I finally moved to the biographies. Most of the women were involved in an apostolate before they were ordained. Interesting group of members, mostly older women I noted. That made sense. Retired women who had worked for years for the church, married women, widows who had means were likely candidates. There was no compensation involved in becoming a woman priest so the applicants had to be financially independent.

Unfortunately, if anyone maintained a position within a diocese or parish church, she would lose her job upon ordination. Because – it

was clear the Church was not happy with the movement. Canon law states only men can be candidates for the priesthood and the law imposed excommunication upon women who claimed to be deacons or priests. It appeared the Association simply ignored the expulsion. The bishop presiding was duly ordained according to the Rites. The laying on of hands, a most important ritual, was formally performed. The women believe that they are not leaving their church but trying to reform it.

God knows the church continually needs reformation, I thought. The history of its economic thirst for power and its arrogance at the expense of valid complainers is hair-raising. In 1632, Galileo, the brilliant scientist, was tried and convicted of heresy because he insisted that the earth moved. He died a sick and convicted man, one forced to recant when threatened by torture. Historians claim that in his heart, he never did recant. Legend has it that he muttered, "*And yet it moves*" under his breath. (Love it.)

Regardless, this incident is widely noted when pointing out the stubborn face of the church and its tortoise-like pace in dealing with pressing matters. It was 1835 before all his books were removed from the Index of Forbidden Books. Pius XII did praise him in 1939 in a speech to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. Finally, in October 1992, John Paul II apologized for the church's treatment of the great scientist.

It appeared the women in the Association were well acquainted with this failing of the church and were tired of waiting. The undertone read, "Enough, already! Let's go. Let us reinstate women's priesthood."

Many had established small congregations, rented space in welcoming Protestant churches and celebrated the Eucharist with interested groups. Home Masses were common. All Christians were welcome. It appeared to me that ALL were welcome.

A new wrinkle indeed! I loved that part because it was so like

Christ who warmed up to everybody: the Samaritan woman, the beggars and those considered unclean. His choice of companions shocked the Jewish leaders.

Let's face it. Jesus was not politically correct!

Yes, I was impressed with Mary Streck, but not surprised. She and her late husband had lived in the projects in Troy and had established a charter school there. Among other things, she was an accomplished artist. All in all, the Association fit her.

I had to congratulate her.

Onward to writing a letter.

Dear Mary,

You probably don't remember me. I was your teacher when you were in high school at Vincentian, AKA Sister Mary Irene.

I read about your becoming a priest and I am so proud of you. ...

CHAPTER FIVE

BACK AGAIN.

September, 2013

I had called Catherine in August. “Book Rosemary and me a room at the Motherhouse. We’ll be there for the Mass and Reception.”

For the past eight months, The Sisters of Mercy had been celebrating their one hundred-fiftieth year’s work in the Albany Diocese with special events targeting certain groups. I was unable to attend the dinner for all the sisters who had worked in the community and left, but I heard it was a big success and I mourned the fact I wasn’t there. However, the culminating celebration was to take place at the Cathedral in September and I made up my mind to take part.

Rosemary, Catherine and I had played important roles when we celebrated our one hundred year anniversary fifty years ago. I illustrated a book that Sister Eugene put together. Rosemary wrote a play about the beginnings of the Mercy Order in the diocese. Catherine directed it and I, with many others, acted a small part and worked on sets.

It was a clever piece, both serious and funny. It opened with a sister standing on a table while some other nun, with a mouthful of pins, was attempting to straighten the hem of her habit. Many myths about nuns were dispelled during our four weekend performances. And our memories! The backstage fiascoes! Rosemary’s habit got caught in the fan, bets among the sister actors as to who could get the most laughs, hilarity erupting backstage at the importune time, muffled giggles and general mayhem.

I couldn’t wait to see the two of them again. We never ran out of conversation. But when I arrived, I soon learned that the talk at the Motherhouse constantly revolved around Mary Theresa Streck’s

ordination. Breakfast conversation panned out something like this.

“We met her and Bishop Bridget Meehan Friday night, at the Unitarian Church, and it was grand. Did I ever think I’d see the day? A woman bishop!”

“When we got home, we couldn’t believe the Diocesan Chancery had called.”

“And they didn’t want the sisters to attend her first Mass! Honestly! It was so disappointing! None of us could believe it was Bishop Hubbard’s ruling. He wasn’t like that. ...”

“But in deference to him. ...” (I surmised the nuns liked Bishop Hubbard.)

“Catherine, that reminds me,” I interjected after breakfast. “I wrote Mary Streck again and told her I’d be here and I gave her your number. I think my first letter was lost. I hope she calls.”

She did, that afternoon, and we made a date for lunch on the next day.

* * *

Her hair was prematurely pure white but other than that, she looked the same. The smile and energy hadn’t dissipated. We decided to eat at a restaurant on New Scotland Avenue. “I’m so delighted we’re meeting,” I exclaimed, “and that you could fit me in, after all this time.”

I ordered a juicy hamburger, rare, one step above still mooing and she ordered a salad. “You thin women always order salads,” I commented.

She had been trying to contact me through the years. Unfortunately, no one she had asked knew where I was. Oh, well. It didn’t take us long to catch up. After I outlined my life history in twenty year lumps – childhood, convent, Boston-marriage-family, and counseling in Albuquerque – I prodded her to tell me how her

journey had evolved.

She had been a Sister of St. Joseph for eighteen years and had begun working with a priest, Jay Murnane, in the projects in Troy. They fell in love, were released from their vows and were married. They established an after-school program, and eventually, a Charter school and worked together for twenty years, until he became ill. “After Jay died in 2004, I kept up our work at the school, but something was missing. I read about the women priests, pursued it, and here I am.”

“I have followed the Danube Seven, but don’t know much about the spreading women priest movement in this country.” I guess my attitude was a bit gushy as I responded to her story. “I kept hoping I’d see the day. The movement is so inevitable.” I told her how I teased Rosemary and how Catherine moaned when I bragged about being right. “It had to happen and during my lifetime! I’m so delighted for you. What a feeling it must be to say Mass.”

She had been arguing with a stubborn piece of lettuce that would not cooperate with her fork. It had quietly evaded her efforts.

“Cut it with a knife,” I suggested. “The French aren’t above using one when they eat greens.” She finally cornered it, stabbed it, cut it, raised it, studied it and then, calmly asked me. . . .

“Why don’t *you* become a priest?”

She made it sound so simple.

I stared at her, and came up with my stock reply when taken off guard.

“Are you *crazy*?”

CHAPTER SIX

ARE YOU CRAZY?

“Have you lost your mind?”

No reaction. She watched me carefully as she finished eating the piece of lettuce.

“I know my hair hasn’t turned all gray and I can still wear heels, and I don’t exactly look ancient, but you DO realize that I’m eighty-one. EIGHTY-ONE!”

I let that sink in.

“And, I have no theological degree,” I added. “Nothing could entice me to go back to school at my age. Besides, unlike most whom I’ve read about, I have never had a desire to be a priest. I think that’s important. It’s never entered my mind. I’ve always felt I’d see it happen, see the day of women priests. But I believe my time passed decades ago. Even when I was younger, I never entertained the thought.”

She didn’t look impressed.

“The whole idea is preposterous,” I concluded.

“Is it?” she asked. “You’ve had an apostolate all your life – the convent, teaching the disadvantaged in the sixties, inner-city Special Ed., mission in Lebanon, and counseling in your church for twenty years. From your conversation, I can tell you’ve kept up with theology. You asked me today if I’ve read the work of Ilia Delio.”

She leaned in closer.

“Adele is one of us and older than you and not able to move around as well as she’d like,” she continued. “She talks to people all the time and prays and says Mass for their intentions. Most of us are older. It doesn’t matter. We all do whatever we feel we’re good at. There’s no obligation and there’s no pressure. You inspired a great many of us

as a teacher. We believe the priest is a leader. That is what they were in the early church. I think you'd be a wonderful priest."

And we changed the subject. Just like that.

* * *

Rosemary had obligations and had left the Motherhouse for her home that afternoon. I thought I'd broach the priesthood subject to Catherine. We were in her room together, having some munchies and cold drinks. From where I was plunked in a comfortable arm chair, I could see out the window past huge pines and Irish-green grass, past the languid street and into the cool light blue sky, the kind of sky that hangs around just before dusk, an early fall sky, the whispering sort.

The peace of the place settled on me, with confetti memories – the silence, the yearning for God in one's life and being too young to know where to look – ghosts gone – the intangible energy of the young novices and postulants, bound up by ridiculous rules, tied neatly with medieval values – the wisdom of the old, their spiritual lives, utterly incomprehensible to us now.

"Catherine, do you ever sit here and ask yourself how we did it?"

She made a mean cocktail and was still puttering, producing good cheese and special crackers.

"Oh, Catherine, come and sit down. I want to talk to you."

I received a few grunts for my trouble, but she finally did settle. How I loved the way she settled. When she puttered, she puttered and when she settled, she settled, a totally non-nervous person.

"Tell me about your lunch with Mary Streck."

"Well, I might as well put it right on the table. She asked me why I don't become a priest. And I told her I had at least eighty-one reasons."

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE FUNNY THING IS, CATHERINE.

“The funny thing is, Catherine, since I retired from counseling in Risen Savior last year, except for my few hangers-on, I’ve been wondering what surprise God has in store for me. It was nice being fancy-free for a while but, I’ve been searching. God has never let me down, always comes up with something. I feel I’m still healthy and vital. You know me. I like being useful.”

Catherine nursed her drink, nodded and hummed.

“Right now, I’m helping Michael and Kelly with the new baby. Johnny O. takes a long time to feed. They’re moving to Atlanta in October and I’m trying to be there when they need me. Michael and I have been whipping the grounds into shape and the place looks cared-for. They’ll be going in a couple of weeks.”

Catherine looked a little concerned. “I didn’t know they were moving. You’re going to miss Michael and his family.”

“I’d hoped I’d see these grandchildren of mine grow up. I missed the other nine. The first one was two when we moved to the Southwest. I’ll be a little lost for a while. It wasn’t that I saw so much of them but they were there when I needed them and for holidays.

“There are more opportunities for the both of them in Atlanta,” I continued. “Kelly is transferring within the same company. She grew up in Georgia, her family is there and she has close friends. The coast offers more – big cities, good education, and the ocean. They’ll be fine, but it will leave a void.”

We never minded discussing the workings of our lives, spiritual and otherwise. When either of us faced some radical change, we investigated the possibilities together, usually over the phone with no holds barred. The glory of close friends! Thank heaven I had

made a few in Albuquerque.

My mind scooted back to our conversation. “Did you ever want to be a priest, Catherine?” I ventured.

“No, but I know some of the sisters who would like to now, especially those who have been on mission. They’ve been doing priests’ work for years.”

We sat back in companionable silence for a few minutes, and after setting my drink down, I got up and quietly observed her room.

“You know, Catherine, I can’t believe that we both bought the same delightful little occasional table. Me in Albuquerque, you in Albany, wandering into Pier I and selecting identical small wrought iron tables. And I love this plant you have on your window sill.” I moved towards it and fingered the leaves. “Hmmm, looks like philodendron but its leaves aren’t shiny and they’re velvety and spotted with white dots.”

“It requires little care. Very hardy.”

“And so are we.” We both laughed. “May I take clippings of it when I leave? They’ll survive the trip home. I’d love to root them.”

I sat down again and rested my head on the back of the chair. “I wonder what it would be like to be a priest, to baptize babies and say Mass, especially to say Mass.”

Catherine sat straight up in her chair as her inner alarm system went off.

“Oh, Mary, you’re not – not even considering such a thing – are you?” Long pause. “You are, aren’t you?” She sighed and sat back. “People take years to make such a decision. Months. They go on retreat, they discern with friends, they ...”

“I’m not jumping into anything. No way. But consider this. I’ve been asking God for the past year or so what I should do. Show me a way. I didn’t seek this request to be a priest. I’m not even attached to it. But we’re on pretty good terms. I can see God up there now, head in hands, pondering. What will I do with her *now*? Does she fit here,

does she fit there?” I was warming up.

“Remember, I’ve always complained about women unable to perform priestly duties. The way the church continues to treat women is sickening, disgusting, arrogant, and has had horrific consequences. In third world countries, women are no better than chattel – and it’s frightening here, too. Domestic abuse, sexual abuse, economic abuse!”

By now, I was excited, galvanized! “The church has paid no attention to its obligations. Women are involved in top places in the world but not in the Catholic Church. You know me, Catherine. ‘Put your money where your mouth is.’ I’ve been complaining and writing about this for years.” I paused to catch my breath.

“We are supposed to be the Light of the World. What a laugh. We’re the tail light!”

Catherine chuckled. “Quite a metaphor.”

“Besides,” I continued, “I don’t have time to sit and stare into space. Two-thirds of the members of my grade school class are already dead, maybe more.”

She was silent, so I went on.

“It’s a puzzle. Why was I even here to find the picture of Mary Streck in the *Times Union*? Why did I get in touch with her after forty years? How did she find time to go to lunch with me? Why did she ask me to become a priest? What possessed her?”

Catherine made no attempt to answer my rhetorical questions.

I continued. “Think about it, Catherine. I’ve never expected God to personally deliver me a telegram. I mean, really! I have no idea where this might lead but I’m not going to dismiss it. I haven’t made up my mind to do anything yet. Remember, when I was in the convent, I took my motto from St. Ireneaus, ‘The glory of God is the living man, meaning, living person, with an emphasis on *living*.’

“I’m not ready to retire from living. If this is in the cards, I’ll play my hand, but I will let the group decide.”

“What do you mean, group?” Catherine asked.

“The Association. Let it be up to them to accept me. I’m not burning with desire. Some women have yearned for priesthood all their life. Whatever happens to me, happens. If this is meant to be, it will be.” I paused, a long thoughtful, pause, and then I muttered, “I wonder what Rosemary will say?”

* * *

“Are you insane?”

“Rosemary, my words exactly! Just what I said to Mary Streck.” I had spoken slowly and softly into the phone. Then, I listened.

“This is the first time in your life you’ve had any time to yourself. You’re eighty-one years old. They make the priests retire at seventy-five! The work involved! How long would you have to study? They’ll throw you out of the Church. Mary, are you sure you want to do this?”

“I’m not sure yet, Honey. (Her family called her Honey and I picked it up.) I’m not sure of anything yet. I’m thinking it over.”

“I know what *you* mean by ‘thinking it over.’ Thinking it over to you means you have your foot in the door.”

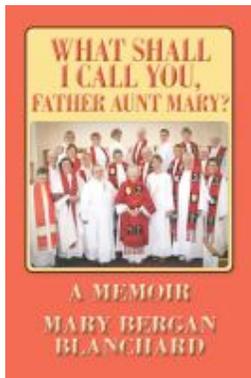
Pause.

“Are you still there?” I ventured.

Long sigh. “Yes, I’m still here on earth. What planet are you on?”

“Oh, come on, Rose, what makes you think they’ll accept me?”

“If Mary Streck didn’t think they’d accept you, why would she have asked you?”



In her memoir eulogy, Blanchard wrote, "The greatest sin of the Catholic Church is its failure to treat women as equals." In 2014, at age 82, contrary to 'males-only' church law, Blanchard was ordained a Catholic woman priest. She states, "Rebelling for its own sake is silly, a waste of time, but gender inequality with its catastrophic results must go. We women priests have taken a major step by leading the church, not leaving it."

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