MINISTRY. Personal experiences

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We all know: Our church is a man’s church. Women are supposed to be helpful, they are especially suited for preparing the parish picknick, cleaning the churches and for looking after the priests‘ garments. They yearn for listening to the teachings and teachers of the church, and they are important objects on whom paternal kindness can be practiced. Unfortunately, we have been too slow in learning that women are to often objects of sexual and spiritual abuse by the clergy.

We all know that poverty hits [women](http://de.pons.com/übersetzung/englisch-deutsch/women) [in](http://de.pons.com/übersetzung/englisch-deutsch/primarily) the first place. Women suffer sexual abuse very often. And there are so many wounded or even murdered women all over the world!

And there is little and more often than not NO HELP AT ALL from the official church! On the contrary the church herself wounds women.

Misogyny [miso‘dschini] has a long tradition in our church. I mention just four examples from hundreds:

"Woman is the devil's gateway." Church Father Tertullian

"Woman is an inferior being, not created by God in His image. " Church

Father Augustinus (354 – 430)

"If you see a woman, think it's the devil! She is a kind of hell!" Pope Pius II (1458-1464)

and at the temporary end of a long line:

„Women are the strawberries on the cake!“Pope Francis 2015

You see we have come a long way from hell to the decoration on a cake: we are nice to look at, sweet and tasty! Decoration, not substance. But the worst with the statement is: I am sure he meant it as a compliment!

It seems to be still a long way to dignity and equality for women.

So, allow me to disappoint you: You will not get theological arguments as to why we urgently need new ways for priestly ministries in our Catholic Church and why women must be admitted to those ministries. I personally find it disgraceful to put forward arguments that women are as much an image of God as men. It infringes my dignity and degrades me. And if that is the case for me as a member of the church, its own dignity is infringed as well – something that has taken place much too often.

**So I will tell you stories**. Stories about the Eucharist, about weddings, about anointing of the sick, about confession and about blessing people and objects. Stories about my experiences and the experiences of men and women in my surrounding.

1. **The Eucharist:**

I begin with a story that happened 50 years ago. A friend, a married theologian, got a job as a parish assistant in a village. The priest was over 80 years old and very ill. Our friend and his wife did all the work that needed to be done in the parish. People already greeted the two of them with “Herr Pfarrer“ and „Frau Pfarrer“. Were they really allowed to do everything that needed to be done? No, there was one significant exception: during the Eucharistic celebration, when it came to the words "On the night he was betrayed", the old sick priest limped in, spoke the two sentences and limped out again. We all felt how wrong that was, and how undignified for all involved and how ridiculous.

Nevertheless, it took us years to realize that it was on us to change things and to implement the consequences for ourselves. We had a small prayer circle for many years together with our parish priest. From time to time we celebrated the Eucharist with him. When he finally became ill and died, we could no longer find a priest who was willing to pray with us once a week. So we did not celebrate the Eucharist for a long time. But we felt that something was missing. We missed this special presence of Jesus in bread and wine, which no one can really explain. Nevertheless, it took us more than ten years before we asked ourselves the question: Why don't we celebrate the Eucharist even without a priests, in memory of Jesus Christ, as he told us? And again, a couple of years went by before we dared jump over our acquired shadows and celebrated the Eucharist without a priest. - We have never regretted it.

And it is so simple. Jesus made it so easy for us. In these everyday signs of bread and wine, he shows us that he wants to live in us, that we are so intensely connected to him and to each other through this common eating and drinking. Incredibly simple, simply incredible. We have no ready-made texts other than the readings from the Bible, and we don't need any preparation. In our prayer circle we sit down together and pray spontaneously and personally. And Jesus is in the midst of us and in us. The simplicity does not diminish the solemnity.

If someone says that only an ordained priest can preside, we say: So what? We are all baptized, we are a royal priesthood. And Jesus asked his people on that long ago Thursday: Do this in memory of me. And we follow him and do it.

1. **Wedding**

The first time we were asked to officiate at the wedding of a befriended couple and the baptism of their child at the same time, we were very excited. It still felt very new, so we were quite okay with another friend of the young couple who was an ordained priest and who presided together with us. This did not create any ecclesiastical problems.

But already the second couple who asked us did not want an alibi priest. An old couple should assist the young couple when they administer the sacrament of marriage to themselves. The bride's parents were farmers and came from a rather conservative village. They were not particularly enthusiastic about their daughter's decision. But they understood essentials: at the official "bridal blessing", which is usually said by the priest, we asked the parents to say this blessing and lay their hands on the young couple. Then the bride’s father said to all the guests, "We don't have a priest here. So I ask all of you to ask God with all your heart to bless this couple. We cannot delegate it to a priest today." And all came forward.

Wonderful! That's the point. We need not delegate our prayers and our religious practice to someone professional. We are responsible ourselves. We have been accustomed to consume religious rituals. If we now start to celebrate in our own responsibility, it takes a whole lot more commitment on our side.

Another example: a befriended couple celebrated their Golden Wedding. They wanted to do it without a priest. The priest of their parish was not very gifted for personal celebrations. So they began to think for themselves what was important to them for this celebration. They came to a solution that built them all up a lot. Especially their grandchildren were thrilled. They said: „A Eucharist can be so beautiful and so meaningful!! We have never experienced this before“.

Meanwhile, there are more and more "golden" married couples who imitate them. We will do it too - in two years.

1. **Anointing of the sick**

Ten years ago my mother-in-law was dying. She barely reacted and could no longer speak. But I noticed a certain restlessness in her and so I asked her if she wanted an anointing of the sick. She was not particularly religious and that's why I didn't ask her earlier. But she nodded and I called for a priest. He came after a few hours, quite in a hurry between a visit to the dentist and the evening mass. He had never seen my mother-in-law before. He was keen on taking confession from her and asked her when she had confessed the last time. I replied in her place that it was probably about 80 years ago. So he read the Ten Commandments to her and told her to nod in case she had violated any of them. I turned to the window so I don't know if she actually was able – or willing - to nod and whether she even undestood what he wanted from her. After that he opened his book to read a prayer, then anointed her by making the sign of the cross on her forehead and disappeared in a hurry in a flurry.

I was upset by this loveless and impersonal action, but I do not want to blame the priest alone. The telefon call messed up his daily schedule, he came to a completely unknown woman who barely reacted. It's a tough job. Surprisingly my mother-in-law seemed relaxed and she died peacefully the next morning. But afterwards I wondered why I hadn't done the ceremony myself and I vowed never again to call an unknown priest to administer this sacrament.

A few years after this experience a member of our prayer group got Alzheimer's disease. When she was in the nursing home, could no longer get up and had lost her understanding, her daughter asked us, "She always liked to be with you. I know that she would like you to anoint her."

So our little prayer circle went to see her. We sang the songs she loved; we addressed in our prayers exactly what had always been important to her; we anointed her: not only her forehead, but also her hands and her feet. We were all very touched, we felt how spirit-filled the room was, how much she herself could still enjoy this celebration, even though she was probably not always mentally present. But spiritually she was connected to us.

We left her and were comforted and somehow elated, hoping and feeling that it was the same to her. It was a labor of love.

4. **Confession**

This is the story of an old peasant woman from a valley in East Tyrol, really high mountains all around. One day she came to me, dressed in an East Tyrolean traditional costume, her hair twisted into a braid, the epitome of a traditional Catholic woman, and said to my complete surprise: You know, I just don't like to confess to a man anymore. The Church requires women always to confess their sins to men, and it is never the other way round. This is a form of submission that I can no lon**g**er accept. If something is really close to my heart - or in my stomach because I feel guilty, then I go to my neighbor. She is a good old woman and understands a lot about life. I tell her what happened and that I need someone to listen to me and to understand how I feel about it. Then we pray together and she blesses me and tells me that God forgives me - and that I should now forgive myself. I always feel relieved and strengthened when I go home. I feel accepted by her and by God. And I know she doesn't tell my secret. Conversely, it is also the case. She comes to me when she needs the promise of forgiveness. This is much better than with our parish priest, who always wants to know sexual details of my married life in the confession.

1. **Blessing**

I find it hard to bear that we even let ourselves to drop the former habit of blessing. In some families, mothers and fathers still bless their children when they leave the house. Women bless the bread with a sign of the cross before they cut it. But this is not normal any longer. It’s a pity. Because to bless is to say good things to someone (benedicere), to assure him or her that God is present and helping.

The still very catholic oriented of us bring bread and meat into church on the Easter Vigil for the priest to bless them; we go to the priest with necklaces and amulets for him to consecrate them. Priests bless animals, cars, new houses and stables, flags, weapons, even the new brand of wine (- but they should not do the same to gay couples!!).

And here is my story: my friend Claudia is a parish assistant in a village near Salzburg. The priest is amiable, but always busy and often not present. One day my friend got a call from the head of the nursing home. She wanted the priest to come and bless the new coffee machine. My friend told her that the priest was not there and offered to come in his place. The director refused. "We really want a priest for that!"

What's the problem? Aside from the question of why a coffee mashine needs to be blessed, - are we still convinced that God hears the requests of an ordained priest rather - or even better - than our own? We don't have any practice in blessing anymore. But this can be made up for, in our own personal way. I am very convinced that God will like to hear us.

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Those were my stories. I could tell you many more, about baptisms and confirmations, about celebrating the ressourection at Easter, about a sacrament of thanksgiving, harvesting when friends retire from work, about the many occasions in a woman’s life, that need a reinforcing ritual – and that never even occur to male and single church leaders, … and so on.

Hopefully, these stories make it clear that the reform of our church must, to a very significant extent, come from the grassroots, that is from us. We have people among us who have the "fighting or warrior gene" and all the theological competence and an unlimited tolerance of frustration. It is important that they stand up to the church leadership when it is on an wrong path.

But even if you don't have this fighting gene, you can begin to renew the church around you. Decide on your own personal pace, "take your time, go slowly", but go! Implement your own ministry! There is so much to do – and Jesus is waiting.