



CHURCH OF THE ASCENSION

Pastoral Letter from the Rector on the Ministry of Ordained Women at Ascension Advent 2018

Dear people of Ascension,

For a variety of reasons, and with the support of both of our Wardens, I am considering lifting the parish's ban on the ministry of women priests. I'm writing now to share my reasoning and to invite your responses, including your participation in upcoming conversations.

I don't intend here to delve into theological arguments *for* or *against* women's ordination. If your views on this matter are more traditional, please know that, having once shared those views, I understand at least some of the reflection and prayer that may have led to your convictions. If, on the other hand, you've long supported women in ordained ministry and wonder 'What's the big deal?', I ask you to be sensitive to pastoral and legacy matters here. Ascension was once the national epicenter of resistance to women's ordination in the Episcopal Church.

You may know that, as Rector, I have sole canonical authority to decide this matter. But unilateral action by a Rector with regard to potentially divisive matters rarely serves the good of a parish. I therefore ask you to consider how you may share your thoughts and questions, and to listen to the thoughts and questions of others, in a way that will best serve both the present membership and the best future that we can envision here.

Please consider taking part in one of two listening sessions that Father Bob Petite has kindly agreed to facilitate on Sunday, December 16, after the 9:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. masses. I also invite you to be present and to share your thoughts with Wardens, Vestry members and me at our next Vestry meeting on Saturday, December 15 (beginning at 1:15 p.m.). You may also, of course, convey your views directly to me or our Wardens or any member of the Vestry.

I pray that the considerations I've added on the back page of this letter may prompt rather than stifle our positive exchange of thoughts, hopes and questions. Whatever discomfort any of us may feel, the topic seems well-timed for Advent, as we are compelled to ask once again what it means for us to *prepare the way of the Lord*.

In Christ and with prayers,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Patrick Raymond', followed by a small '+' symbol.

The Very Rev. Patrick Raymond, Rector
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Some of the Rector's considerations regarding women priests at Ascension - Advent 2018

- + The overall ministry environment in our diocese continues to migrate from a time when women clergy were a novelty. Women have been called to and now serve in 32 out of the 68 full-time Rector positions in the Diocese of Chicago. Many also serve important leadership roles in our diocese.
- + As I've noted before, the call of Mother Erika Takacs to serve as Church of the Atonement Rector is a signal event. We at Ascension have not picked up *any* Atonement members seeking refuge in a male-clergy-only parish. I've been told that Bishop Montgomery was present for Mother Takacs' first Sunday, in July, and that when she finished the mass, he leaned to a retired priest next to him and said, "*Well, we've got nothing to teach her, do we?*"
- + I believe it's fair to imagine that the next episcopal election in the Diocese of Chicago may well result in our having a female bishop.
- + Following Father Dunkerley's death in August, I am finding it more difficult to fill our mass rota with available male clergy. Father Petite was away for six weeks this fall. Father Richard Daly, who has assisted on a half dozen Sundays over the past six months, may be moving out of state early in 2019. Being able to welcome, train and schedule female clergy may improve our chances of continuing to offer the Solemn High Mass.
- + Ascension's deteriorating attendance for the past dozen years or more generally mirrors the trend in other Episcopal and mainline congregations. We are clearly not attracting new members in search of a parish where women do not serve at the altar. Young newcomers here with whom I speak universally find Ascension to be appealing *in spite of* and *not because of* the absence of female clergy here.
- + Most of the young adults who shared their stories at a recent Sunday forum explained their draw to the Episcopal Church in terms of LGBTQ-friendliness and, for the former Roman Catholics in particular, *'the surprise and blessing of experiencing a woman at the altar.'*
- + St. James' Cathedral Curate and Deacon Anna Broadbent (who lives in the Ascension coach house) will be ordained priest on December 23. She and I have preliminarily talked about partnering to attract more young adults to our Wednesday evening mass, possibly followed by a meal and adult education opportunity, once or twice a month. The endeavor may or may not contribute to our renewal but seems worth a try.
- + In my nearly three years at Ascension, only one parishioner has shared views with me in opposition to the ordained ministry of women. A dozen or so others have shared their thoughts that *'it's time to move on from the past'*. I hope through the December 16 listening sessions to get a better understanding of more members' thoughts and hopes.
- + One Ascension member who has been in congregations with both male and female clergy observed that there do tend to be differences, even if hard to put into words, in how women lead worship. I was cautioned away from the expectation that there would or will be 'no difference'. This led me to wonder about ways we might engage and prepare parishioners in the event that we do welcome female priests here.
- + I envision that the welcoming of women clergy would be a gradual process. Our familiar, male go-to clergy will remain active and be scheduled here much as at the present time. I would also like to envision a time, in a few years, when most or all of us might mainly focus on the faithfulness, gifts and authenticity of the priest who is ministering rather than on her or his gender.