

Women persist in ordination struggle

By Teresa A. Parsons
Associate editor

ROCHESTER — Pat Pickett isn't sporting license plates proclaiming "Ordain W" anymore.

Feeling as dented and battered as the five-year-old tags, she decided earlier this year to answer the call to ordination outside the Roman Catholic Church.

Many of Marta Inés Castillejo's friends are urging her to do likewise.

"Why are you still a Roman Catholic? That's the popular question," said the fourth-year student at Colgate Rochester Divinity School.

Castillejo's aim is not to serve as a priest or pastor, but to counsel married couples and families from a pastoral perspective.

recalls the period as a rollercoaster ride from the "high" of conference discussions with the U.S. bishops' committee on women in the church and society, to the "low" of 1982, when the national conference moved to New York City and local advocates succumbed to burnout and a lack of new interest.

Within the last two years, the Rochester conference has reassembled, fueled by enthusiastic new members and seasoned veterans. "(Women's ordination) is a critical issue of the 1980s," Sister Sobala said. "Women have been moving out of the church and on to other issues, not engaging the institutional church any more. We basically feel that ordination is the paradigm issue, the primary issue by which everything

Humor has helped sustain those who, like Fitzpatrick, have stayed faithful to the struggle for ordination since the mid-1970s. But anger often underlies the wisecracks. One-third of the November 4 conference participants chose a workshop on anger from among 11 options, according to presenter Roslyn Karaban, a counselor and assistant professor at St. Bernard's Institute.

Popular culture and stereotypes dismiss angry women — especially those seeking ordination — as nags and shrews. But at the bottom of their anger is hurt, Karaban observed. "Revealing that makes us vulnerable and we don't want that any more," she said.

Castillejo, who outlined her story at the conference, can recite a veritable shopping list of rejection for her ministry in the Catholic church. "So many days in my four years at the seminary... I found myself driving to school in tears because obstacle after obstacle came up," she recalled.

Her ardent homilies are most often heard in non-Catholic churches, where women are welcome in the pulpit. She was even "kicked out" of one parish, where a man told her she was unqualified to offer a talk on teenage sexuality because she had no seminary training.

"That's one reason I went to the seminary — so one more man won't have that to tell me," she said.

Denied ordination, Castillejo can practice as a pastoral psychotherapist, either without certification by a professional organization, or by obtaining a special endorsement from a bishop or diocese to qualify for membership in the AAPC.

But the most recent roadblock to Castil-



CNS/Wide World photo
Last February's ordination of Episcopal Bishop Barbara Harris was an exception to otherwise unpromising prospects for women's ordination advocates. Yet the Episcopal Church's action is blamed for blocking negotiations on Anglican-Roman Catholic unity, according to Ruth McDonough Fitzpatrick, keynote speaker at a local women's ordination conference November 4.

I was a woman," she explained.

As Pickett completed her master of divinity degree from Colgate Rochester Divinity School last May, she earned the Trost Award, recognizing outstanding pastoral ability. Not long afterward, Lake Avenue Baptist Church, where she served a year's internship, offered her a post as associate minister.

The two developments confirmed her desire to minister, and Pickett accepted the church's offer in August. Yet she denies that she has "thrown in the towel" on the Roman Catholic Church.

"There was no way I could not answer the call to ordination," she said. "But nothing has really changed as far as spiritual tradition... I don't feel I gave anything away or up — it's expanding."

Pickett's immediate family has supported her decision, but it was complicated by her husband's work as president of St. John Fisher College and chairman of the Bishop's Commission on Catholic school reorganization in Monroe County. The decision has also cost her friendships and the respect of some relatives.

"I have close friends who will have nothing to do with me — I'm a fallen woman," she said.

Meanwhile, Pickett has kept at least one of her "Ordain W" license plates. "It's a sign that I'm still in solidarity," she said. "I'm finding that patriarchy is in every tradition, not just in the Roman Catholic tradition. I'm just in a different phase of working for inclusivity."

'It seems so easy to step over (to another denomination, but) all my life, people have been telling me, "Just be American — North American." "Talk like a man and you'll get places." Now in terms of my religion, people are urging me to sell out. ... I can't be the Roman Catholic, Hispanic lay woman that I am.'

Marta Inés Castillejo

She recently learned, however, that certification from the American Association of Pastoral Counselors is reserved for the ordained, or for those who can elicit a special endorsement from a bishop or diocesan authority.

"It seems so easy to step over (to another denomination)," the Colombian native said, "(but) all my life, people have been telling me 'Just be American — North American.' 'Talk like a man and you'll get places.' Now in terms of my religion, people are urging me to sell out. ... I can't be the Roman Catholic, Hispanic lay woman that I am."

More than 100 men and women who share Pickett's and Castillejo's frustration gathered November 4 at Nazareth College for "Don't Throw in the Towel," a day of prayer and discussion co-sponsored by the Rochester Women's Ordination Conference and the college's women's studies and religious studies departments.

The conference marks a rebirth of interest in women's ordination in Rochester, which served as headquarters for the national Women's Ordination Conference from 1979-82.

Sister Joan Sobala, co-director of the national conference during its local tenure,

else in the church is measured."

Despite the local resurgence, the signs of the times are ominous for Roman Catholic women seeking ordination, according to Ruth McDonough Fitzpatrick, national Women's Ordination Conference coordinator and a keynote speaker at the November 4 gathering.

Conservative bishops appointed by Pope John Paul II will soon outnumber those who are collegially inclined on the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Fitzpatrick said. The bishops' committee drafting a pastoral letter on women's concerns has meanwhile "gone from 'not good' to 'very bad,'" she observed, pointing to reported changes in the letter's title and emphasis from "partnership" to "friendship."

And although Pope John Paul II offered to bring Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre to Rome via chauffeur-driven limousine to avoid a schism with the arch-conservative Society of St. Pius X, the pope has steadfastly refused to meet with WOC representatives, Fitzpatrick said.

"Am I holding my breath for a car and driver to take me to the Vatican?" she asked. "Will hell and the Atlantic Ocean have to freeze over first?"

'I felt the call to ministry for many years, but the church said I couldn't feel that call because I was a woman.'

Pat Pickett

lejo's plans has cast the issue of women's ordination in a new light for her. "I was in favor of women's ordination, so that if and when they are called by God, they can do that," she explained. "Now, though, I feel it's imperative."

Equally imperative was Pat Pickett's need to answer the call to ordination which emerged from years of confusion. "I felt the call to ministry for many years, but the church said I couldn't feel that call because

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