

# Study reveals church allowed women priests

By Patricia Zapor  
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — An Italian researcher believes he has found proof that early Christians ordained women priests.

A letter from a fifth-century pope and a handful of crypt markers from the same era show that contrary to Vatican declarations, at least a few women served as priests while their congregations remained in full communion with the church, according to Giorgio Otranto, director of the Institute for Classical and Christian Studies at the University of Bari in Italy.

Otranto originally published his findings in an Italian journal of antiquities in 1981, but they remained unpublicized until a women's studies researcher from the University of Wisconsin came across his report, translated it into English and presented it at an international conference in 1990.

The Women's Ordination Conference, which seeks ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church, sponsored a six-city U.S. tour by Otranto in October. He was joined on the tour by a colleague from Bari and Mary Ann Rossi, the researcher from Wisconsin who translated and published Otranto's 1981 report.

Among several reasons for maintaining the prohibition on women priests, the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1976 cited the history of ordaining only men.

As part of a presentation in Washington, Otranto showed slides of some of the ancient inscriptions on which his study was based.

Responses to his work were provided by Orthodox Father Elias Farajaje-Jones, a consultant on Faith and Order to the World

Council of Churches and faculty member at Howard University's School of Divinity in Washington, and Benedictine Sister Mary Collins, chairman of the Department of Religion and Religious Education at the Catholic University of America.

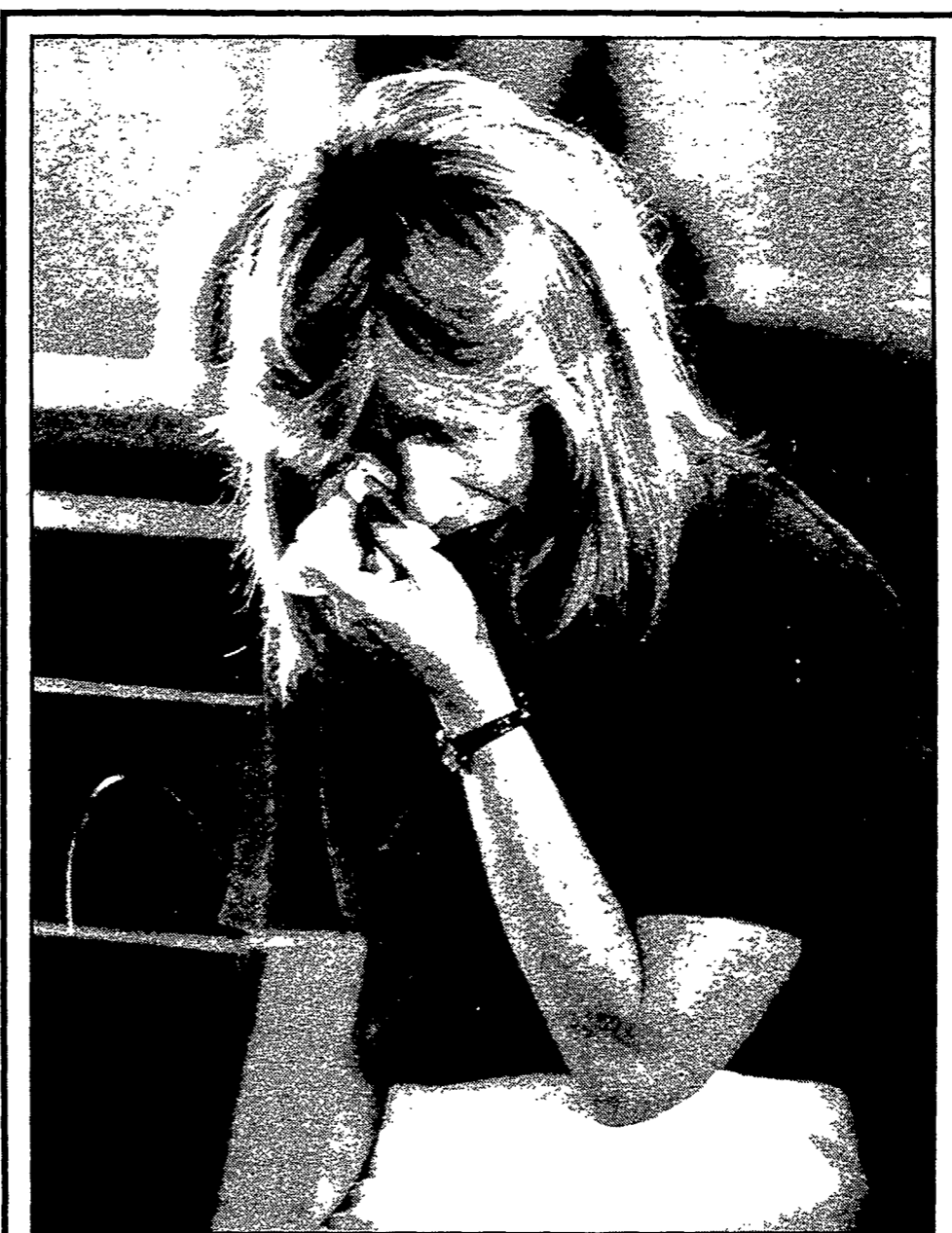
Sister Collins said she believes Otranto's research is credible, though any changes in the Catholic ban on ordaining women are not likely to come from a Vatican reconsideration of his work, but from individual bishops' conferences.

Otranto concedes that even when women served as priests, the practice was the exception rather than the rule and was condemned by the church hierarchy. But dioceses that apparently ordained women in southern Italy and in what was then Gaul and Dalmatia — now France and Yugoslavia — remained in union with the Roman Catholic Church, despite official disapproval, he said.

"In the first five or six centuries of the church, the condemnation of women in the priesthood was not nearly so unanimous as it is today," Otranto said in a speech at Catholic University Oct. 18. A standing-room-only crowd packed the 200-seat auditorium as Otranto, through interpreters, described research done more than 10 years ago.

He sifted through tens of thousands of inscriptions on tombs dating to the earliest days of Christianity, finding about 15 that seemed to refer to women who were deacons or priests.

References to women as "presbytera" or "diacona" previously were interpreted by church scholars as meaning "wife of priest" or "wife of deacon." But Otranto and his colleague and fellow researcher Ada Campione believe those women actually served as priests and deacons.



AP/Wide World Photos

**MOURNING VICTIMS** — An unidentified woman attends an Oct. 18 memorial service for the 23 people killed by a gunman at the Luby's Cafeteria in Killeen, Texas Oct. 16. The assailant, George Hennard of nearby Belton, drove his truck into the restaurant and opened fire with two handguns. The killings marked the worst shooting massacre in U.S. history. Hennard killed himself after police began to return his fire.

## Archbishop says war in Bosnia would be a 'massacre'

MILAN, Italy (CNS) — A Yugoslavian archbishop warned that tensions were rising in his republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and said it was a "miracle" that civil war had not yet broken out there.

If conflict does erupt in the latest breakaway republic, Croatians will be massacred, said Archbishop Vinko Puljic of Sarajevo.

"Every day is becoming more difficult. The provocations by the army and Serbian extremists are multiplying," he said in an interview Oct. 16 in the Italian daily, *Avvenire*.

"The Croatians in Bosnia, unlike those in Croatia, do not possess weapons. It's a miracle that war hasn't broken out here, and if it does, we won't be able to defend ourselves: it will be a massacre for us," he said.

Bosnia-Herzegovina is where the popular Marian shrine of Medjugorje is located. The republic borders Croatia, where the

fighting has been concentrated. The federal army has reportedly been using Bosnia-Herzegovina as a staging area for attacks on Croatian targets.

The Catholic minority in Bosnia-Herzegovina has come under increasing provocation, Archbishop Puljic said. He cited incidents of pastors being beaten, churches attacked and a nun roughed up and told to "stay off the street in a religious habit."

"There is a clear anti-Catholic character to these aggressions," he said. The archbishop attributed the acts to Serbian extremists, but said the federal army had also destroyed a historic church in a Bosnian town. Meanwhile, the army has called up reservists, forcing seminaries to empty. Many of the seminarians are hiding with relatives or have fled the country, he said.

The archbishop said he blamed Serbia for the inflammatory situation. The tensions, he said, stem from Serbia's attempts

to expand its borders by force.

There is deep and longstanding friction between Croats and Serbs. Each group accuses the other of past atrocities and political abuse.

Relations between Catholics and Orthodox in Bosnia-Herzegovina have worsened dramatically, Archbishop Puljic said. Most Orthodox are part of the Serbian minority there.

The archbishop said he had promoted an inter-religious prayer service recently; two Muslim leaders came but the Orthodox pastor refused.

"It's paradoxical: we Catholics get along better with the Muslims than the Orthodox. Maybe the reason is that the Orthodox are not evangelized enough. Often they are not even baptized and know nothing of the Christian faith," he said.

Muslims are the largest religious group in Bosnia-Herzegovina, followed by the Orthodox and Catholic communities.

Bosnia-Herzegovina is among the four Yugoslavian republics that want to turn the country into an alliance of independent states. Serbia, which dominates the federal government, wants to retain a centrally-controlled federation. The fighting began when Croatia and Slovenia declared their independence last summer and seceded.

On Oct. 15, the parliament of Bosnia-Herzegovina declared the republic's sovereignty, which added to the fears that civil war could erupt there, too. Local leaders played down the vote, however, saying it would not necessarily lead to secession.

Vatican Radio reported Oct. 15 that for the first time in recent history, six of Yugoslavia's 23 bishops were unable to attend a plenary session of the country's bishops' conference. The meeting began Oct. 15 in Zagreb, the Croatian capital, which has been under off-and-on attack by federal and Serbian forces.

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