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Wexford, PA 15090-9703  
May 9, 2006

Most Reverend Donald W. Wuerl, S.T.D.  
Diocese of Pittsburgh  
111 Boulevard of the Allies  
Pittsburgh, PA 15222-1618

Dear Bishop Wuerl,  
A letter to be shared with the faithful

My name is Joan Clark Houk, the woman from the Diocese of Pittsburgh who is to be ordained a Roman Catholic Womanpriest in Pittsburgh on July 31, 2006. I want you to know who I am and why I prayerfully follow this path.

My life of almost 66 years has been rooted in the Catholic Church. I grew up in St. Francis Xavier Church on the Northside (presently Risen Lord Parish). It was in this community where I received all of my sacraments, was educated, joyfully participated in May Crownings, reverently processed in 40 Hours devotions, joined the Junior Catholic Daughters of America, and was active in the CYO in the 1950's. My education continued at St. Peter High School where I learned to share the earnings from my after-school jobs with the missions, and to pray the rosary daily. In my Catholic family, my grandmother taught me how to make bread, blessing it as it went into the oven, and sharing it with every person who came to our door.

Contrary to the experiences of many others who have a vocation to the priesthood, I did not grow up wanting to be a priest. My daily prayer in senior high was for God to send me a man who would be a good husband and a good father to the many children I hoped to have. My prayer was answered when God sent me John, my husband and partner of 45 years. We were blessed with three birth children and three adopted children. As advocates of pro-life there were many January 22's that we marched in Washington, DC. As a family we also marched for civil rights, peace, and for jobs and economic justice.

As our children grew I taught them their Catholic religion and prepared them for First Communion, Reconciliation, Confirmation, and then Marriage. What I taught my own children around the dining room table, I taught to parish children in the CCD room, and to young adults in the parish hall. With four children at home, I began my college education one class at a time and became a professional DRE with a degree in Elementary Education from St. Martin's College. Energized by the spirit and documents of the Second Vatican Council, I worked for a renewed Church. Always active in our home parish as we moved throughout the United States, ministering as a parish volunteer or parish employee, I listened to the Holy Spirit and followed her call.

The Spirit had been leading me, preparing me, and finally calling me through various people in my faith community. At last, in 1992, I recognized the call to priesthood. In 1996 I received my Master of Divinity Degree from the University of Notre Dame, and during 1997-2002 I led two parishes that had no resident priest in Kentucky. What a wonderful blessing, serving God's people. After the many years away I returned here to my hometown where John and I continue to share our talents in the local Church. From my birth as a Catholic through this day, I have never doubted my Catholicism, never been away from the Church. I am a Catholic, and will always be a Catholic.

Canon Law 1024 states: *A baptized male alone receives sacred ordination validly.* Competent Catholic scriptural scholars and theologians find no scriptural or divine law against a woman being ordained. As a matter of fact, history and archeology reveal examples of ordained women in the early Church. The history of this canon has been traced not to God's will nor to Jesus' intent, but to cultural errors in the understanding of the basic nature of women and men. The history of cultural bias against women finding its way into Church law has been extensively documented.

Canon 1024 must be changed to read: *A baptized person alone receives sacred ordination validly.* As it stands now Canon 1024 is an unjust law. Just as many unjust laws had to be broken in order for the laws to be changed (such as during the civil rights movement), I believe Canon 1024 must be broken. For forty years women have been petitioning the Vatican for women's ordination once the true cultural foundation for canon 1024 was uncovered. **It is a sin for the Church to discriminate against women and blame God for it.** The Church's discrimination is part of the systemic discrimination that results in the physical violence, rape, mutilation, bondage, harassment, poverty and abandonment of women. I admonish the Church to turn away from this sin of discriminating against women. **In obedience to the Gospel of Jesus, I will disobey this unjust law, Canon 1024, through the valid but illicit ordination as a Roman Catholic Womanpriest in July.**

The validity of these Roman Catholic Womenpriests ordinations is of course the central issue. The womenbishops who will ordain womenpriests here in Pittsburgh have been validly ordained by male bishops in good standing with the Vatican. We believe there is no question regarding the validity of orders, but they are indeed illicit with the specific intent to bring about a change to Canon 1024.

Bishop Wuerl, I do not intend to start a Church. I will exercise my priesthood here in Pittsburgh by reaching out to those people in the margins, the apathetic person, the hurt person, the excluded person, and minister to them. I will encourage them to become active in the parishes, and in the spirit of Vatican II to use their voices in renewing the Church. I will encourage them to serve the poor, and to work for social justice.

This is who I am, and why I will be ordained. This is why other faithful Catholics support my ordination.

**This letter is an open letter. It is not my intent to direct any action against the Pittsburgh Diocese or address any criticism toward you personally. Neither do I intend to ask for your support because I know it cannot be given. I am fully aware that you personally are not able to effect this change in Canon 1024. I welcome any opportunity to meet with you with only one condition that any communication between us be open to the faithful.**

**Your sister in Christ,**

**Joan Clark Houk**

**P.S. It has come to my attention that you are being advised by your staff regarding these ordinations, and that some of the information you have been given is not accurate. I have polled the women ordained in Canada in 2005. They have not received any notice of excommunication from the Vatican, or any communication from the Vatican, as you may have been advised. Nor have the women ordained in 2004 and 2003 received any such notification. Secondly, the ordinations take place on a boat primarily for the symbolic value, and not to avoid the jurisdiction of the local bishop. When ordinations have been in international waters, as some have, it has provided an opportunity for the local bishop to dismiss them as not in his jurisdiction. This will obviously not be possible here in Pittsburgh. I am sure you want to receive and provide the faithful of this diocese with only accurate information. I am available to answer any questions you may have.**