

Leap of faith: Newton women ordained as priests after leaving Roman Catholic Church

Photos



PHOTO BY MELISSA OSTROW

Holy Spirit Catholic Community's Rosa M. Buffone of Newton and Verona J. Mazzei of Natick were ordained last month as Catholic priests.

By Joyce Kelly/Gatehouse News Service

[Wicked Local Newton](#)

Posted Jun 02, 2010 @ 06:00 AM

Newton —

For as long as she can remember, Verona Mazzei wanted to minister to people, but as a member of the Roman Catholic Church, she was content to assist in other ways.

Until the day everything changed.

Like most other French girls living in Nonantum at the time (1955), Mazzei was part of a close-knit community whose bonds were cemented at St. Jean l'Évangéliste Church.

When she grew up, Mazzei took on the role of religious education director, she recalled, working with what she considered her extended family, and she loved it.

The associate pastor of St. Jean's, Father Paul Shanley, was a progressive priest who let her preach, something the Catholic Church did not permit women to do, she said.

The now-defrocked priest allowed her to give homilies, or commentary following a scripture reading, akin to a sermon, and let her write children's liturgies, she said.

"Everything was fine. Until the abuse with Father Paul Shanley. It was my program [in 2002] where the kids were molested — my students, my kids, my friends' kids," she said.

"These were the kids I grew up with who were still in the neighborhood, so it was like family," said Mazzei, who now lives in Natick.

One day, she got a cryptic call from her daughter-in-law, insisting on a family meeting “because only this family can go through this crisis together,” she recalled.

“I had no idea what she was talking about,” Mazzei said.

An attorney, wanting to brace her for the imminent media storm, had warned her Shanley had molested someone in the community, but it never occurred to her that it was a member of her family, she said.

Mazzei’s son-in-law, who was in the military service, started remembering Shanley sexually abusing him as a child, she said.

“All hell broke loose when it finally came out. He was put on suicide watch” and had to get psychiatric treatment, Mazzei said.

One of the boy’s friends testified during Shanley’s trial that the abuse began in the 1980s when the boy was 6 years old and continued until he was 12. He said Shanley would pull him from his classes to rape and fondle him in various places around the church, including the pews and the confessional.

“The first thing that went through my mind [when the family spoke about the abuse], was, I knew these kids and I knew they weren’t lying. I knew, you couldn’t have these kids with the same story” if it were not true, she said.

“I felt guilty, because these were my friends’ kids. I was a mother, I was supposed to protect them,” Mazzei said.

“I felt I let my friends down, I let my community down. These people were my family. As a mother, you always blame yourself: Where was I? How come I didn’t see it?” she said.

She had nightmares “for a long, long time,” she said.

It took her two years of therapy to realize that she could not understand what pedophilia was, because it was not in her nature, she said.

Aside from the psychological trauma it caused, the scandal also left Mazzei and other faithful searching for a new church after St. Jean’s was shuttered, she said.

Mazzei thought she found her home at Our Lady’s on Washington Street, until a sudden gut feeling compelled her to leave, she said.

“I was sitting there at a pew, meditating, and I got a rush of ‘Get out of here,’ of fear. I listened to my gut and ran out of the church,” she said.

There was nothing wrong with Our Lady’s, she said, but she realized, she no longer had faith in the church hierarchy, the organization.

So she started searching for a new house of God, she said. Nothing felt like the right fit outside the Roman Catholic Church, she said.

Mazzei finally found what she was looking for with a small group of church members from Our Lady’s who advocated for “priests of integrity” — those priests who spoke out against pedophilia and pushed for accountability of abusers.

They formed a community and researched the Old Catholic Church, ultimately joining the Ecumenical Catholic Communion.

The tradition follows the Roman Catholic faith, she said, but “without all the organizational trappings.”

There, Mazzei not only found her new church, but her calling: an ordained priest.

It was a calling she could never fulfill at St. Jean’s, or Our Lady’s, she said.

“As a woman in the Roman Catholic Church, as a woman, it’s ‘You can wash my vestments, you can put out my vestments, but you can never wear my vestments,’” Mazzei said.

“In all fairness to Paul Shanley, he helped me to recognize my own ministry. He allowed me to see what was always there,” Mazzei said.

Many times when she was head of religious education at St. Jean’s, she reached out to women, mothers of children who didn’t feel worthy of the church because they were divorced, she said.

She brought them back to the church, she said, and told them, “God loves you, forgives you, knows your heart.”

“I felt, in my heart, I blessed them. [Becoming a priest] was not a big leap for me, I’ve been doing it my whole life,” she said.

On May 23, she and Rosa Buffone, a Newton resident and former Our Lady’s parishioner, were ordained as priests at the Unitarian Universalist Church, where the Old Catholic Church rents a chapel.

This past Sunday, Mazzei performed her first Mass. All over her white robe, she sewed brightly colored handprints from her grandchildren.

“They represent my commitment to protect children,” Mazzei said.

“Out of all of this [tragedy from abuse], I want people to know, through all this pain, out of the ashes of the church, there is a light. Out of the ashes, something good is coming, there is an alternative, a church that is open to all,” said Mazzei.

Joyce Kelly can be reached at 781-398-8005 or jkelly@cnc.com.

[Copyright 2010 Newton TAB. Some rights reserved](#)