CHAPTER SEVEN

WOMEN, RELIGIOUS AGENCY AND
THE POLITICS OF VOCATION

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Listen, Bishop. Listen well. Altogether, here in this area, more than one hundred women now and then tell to one another, to me, to anyone who has ears for hearing, their expectations, disappointments, indescribable humiliations, their hesitations, lack of cooperation and participation . . . and many times, of the misunderstanding of most of our clerics. That is why the majority of the women folk have asked me to write to you with these thoughts.—Liwwat Boke, August 25, 1844

Your Eminence: I am a thirteen year old girl. I’ve been an altar server for four years at my Parish and I think that it is unfair that I and other girls can no longer serve on the altar. Why am I being deprived of that opportunity? It is disturbing me to think that I am not equal in the Church. I’ve started a petition to try to allow girl altar servers. I’ve collected 220 signatures.—Sincerely, Lilia, November 30, 1991

Once I questioned an archbishop. I said, ‘Our Lord came through the womb of a woman. And how is it that a married woman is not allowed to give the Lord to people as communion?’ He didn’t give me an answer!—Rose, a south Indian Catholic, 2003

My daughter has opinions about everything, and she is absolutely unabashed in her willingness to share them. Even when I disagree with her, I admire the color that rises in her cheeks, the strength that grows in the volume of her voice, the emphasis of her strong hands, and the magic she works with words when she feels fierce and right.—Martha Manning, 1996, from Chasing Grace

Four Voices/Four Vocations

Despite the almost 150 year spread and half a world geographically between them, Lilía, a 20 year-old Catholic young adult, Liwwat Boke, a Midwestern US farming woman, and Rose, a South Indian Catholic grandmother, all exhibit the “strength of voice” that Catholic author Martha Manning admires in her daughter. Woman-conscious Catholics across generations and around the globe have devised in different
times and spaces, a variety of ways to live out their sense of vocation by exercising their voice and carving out space for women. The stories of Lilia and Rose come from two branches of a research agenda that focuses on Catholic women’s negotiation of their dual identities as women and as Catholics. Their stories and those of other Indian and US women form the foundation for this exploration of the politics of vocation.

The “politics” of vocation refers to the ways in which people negotiate the conflicts between identity claims that are salient to them and the constraints they encounter within social institutions of various kinds. This understanding is in keeping with Max Weber’s definition: “politics” … “means striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power…among groups” (1946: 78). Unlike the context of the state that Weber addressed, the sites of the politics of vocation may be small, as in a family, or quite large, as in the setting considered here, Roman Catholicism. Weber’s notion of vocation was action which “nourishes…inner balance and self-feeling by the consciousness that…life has meaning [italics his] in the service of ‘a cause’” (1946: 84). In this chapter, I argue that many Roman Catholic women are engaged in a struggle to influence the distribution of power within their church so that their treasured identities of both woman and Catholic can be fully claimed, expressed and ultimately valued within the wider institution. Their “cause” is to live their vocation in the concrete ways they feel called, for Rose, to be a communion minister, for Lilia to restore the presence of females in the sanctuary as altar servers, and for Liwwat, that the bishop seriously listen to women’s concerns about the roles of women within marriage and child-bearing. The strategies these and other women use to claim ownership of Catholicism and to both transmit and transform their religious tradition are interpreted here as a form of religious agency.

Religious agency means a personal and collective claiming and enacting of dynamic religious identity. As religious identity, it may include, but is not limited to, a received or an acquired identity, whether passed on by family, religious group or other social entity such as an educational community, or actively sought. To constitute religious agency, this identity is claimed and lived as one’s own, with an insistence on active owner-

1 “Rose” and all other respondent names are aliases, which in most cases were chosen by the respondents themselves.