"Our Creator Who Art in Heaven:"
Paradox, Ritual, and Cultural Transformation

Mary F. Hoffman
Texas State University-San Marcos

Amanda Medlock-Klyukovski
Truman State University

Contemporary organizations are typically marked by conflicting interests and contradictory demands on individuals. It is important to understand how these tensions are managed in everyday ways. Ritual, and the adaptation of official ritual is one way in which individuals may negotiate the paradoxes of their culture and accomplish cultural transformation. Analysis of qualitative data from three communities of Benedictine women reveals that by adapting ritual members resist church-imposed identities of women as rightly excluded, subordinate, and disempowered. By resisting these identities, sisters reinforce the transformation of their own culture; and by doing so in the presence of outsiders, they make an argument for the transformation of the larger culture of the church.

To go from this community to the Catholic church and think about what the differences are—to feel the kind of schizophrenia, is the only way I can describe it, that comes from trying to be a faithful member of both. (Sister Melinda).

Sure I wish it were easier for people sometimes, but I think we’ve come up with some very creative ways of celebrating, sharing, and praying together because of that tension. (Sister Rhonda).

MARY F. HOFFMAN (Ph.D., University of Kansas, 2000) is Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Texas State University-San Marcos, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX, 78666-4626. Amanda Medlock-Klyukovski (M.A., Texas State University-San Marcos, 2001) is an instructor at Truman State University and a doctoral student at the University of Missouri. The first author may be contacted concerning this essay at (512) 245-2222 or mh34@txstate.edu. This essay is based in part on data and findings of the first author’s doctoral dissertation written under the direction of Dr. Robert Rowland. A portion of the project was funded through a Research Enhancement Grant from Texas State. The authors wish to thank the editor and anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.
Contemporary organizations are marked by competing demands, conflicting interests, and paradox (Ashcraft, 2000, 2001a, 2001b; Gottfried & Weiss, 1994; Martin, 1992; Stohl & Cheney, 2001; Young, 1989). In discussing these demands, Stohl and Cheney (2001) define paradox as occurring when “the pursuit of an objective involves actions that are themselves antithetical to the desired end” (p. 354). As the above comments illustrate, communities of Benedictine sisters are not different from most organizations. Changes in the Roman Catholic Church and in society over the last fifty years have created a paradox for Benedictine women in which attempts to be loyal to the institutional church come into conflict with attempts to uphold the more feminist values embraced by their communities.

Although the conflict may be felt more strongly on a daily basis by Benedictine women, members of any organization must learn to negotiate the tension between their own world and the world around them, and between the identities they construct and the identities imposed upon them. Because humans use language to transcend differences, communication scholars are in a position to understand how members of organizations creatively address paradox (Burke, 1961). Ashcraft (2001a) argues that communication scholars are uniquely suited to study how members negotiate the paradox created by conflicting demands. Studying the communication processes by which members negotiate conflicting identities on a daily basis can illuminate both strategies for living in tension and the creative potential for transformation of what are often viewed as obstacles to organizing.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how members of three Benedictine communities use a specific communication behavior, ritual, to negotiate paradox and contribute to the transformation of their communities into organizations that can uphold the values of members while remaining affiliated with the institutional church. Ritual, “the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life” (Rothenbuhler, 1998), is a common practice in organizations (Kondo, 1990; Knuf, 1993; Putnam, Van Hoven, & Bullis, 1991; Trice & Beyer, 1984; Young 1989). Rituals represent who a community is and what it believes (Knof, 1993; Rothenbuhler, 1998). By embracing the core ritual, but adapting key elements, sub-communities can express both who they are and what they would like the larger organization to be, and help move the organization toward that vision. Because of a half-century history of cultural transformation, the deep-seated conflict that marks life in Benedictine communities, and the centrality of ritual to these communities, Benedictine women provide an excellent case study of the role of ritual in negotiating paradox and transforming culture.
Conflict, Paradox, and Organizational Culture

Much recent work in organizational culture has emphasized the paradoxical nature of organizations (Ashcraft, 2000, 2001a, 2001b; Gottfried & Weiss, 1994; Martin, 1992; Stohl & Cheney, 2001; Young, 1989). Martin (1992) identifies three perspectives observers may take when viewing an organizational culture. An integration view focuses on those elements that are cohesive and unified within a culture, a differentiation perspective pays closest attention to the oppositional element, and a fragmentation view accepts that any organizational culture will always be ambiguous and divided. Most importantly though, Martin emphasizes that the most effective way to study organizational cultures is to utilize all three lenses—to identify points of unity, points of opposition and points of ambiguity. This perspective is especially useful when examining communication in a culture marked by paradox.

One explanation for the conflicting demands that mark organizational cultures is that organizations are not only composed of multiple individuals who will have divergent interpretations and interests, but each individual in an organization also has multiple, and sometimes conflicting, identities. Burke (1937/1984) argues, “The so-called I is merely a unique combination of partially conflicting ‘corporate we’s’” (p. 264). The manner in which individuals manage their partially conflicting “we’s” in organizations has been addressed by a number of scholars. Russo’s (1998) study of professional and organizational identification among journalists, and Scott’s (1997) study of forest service employees support the idea that individuals can identify strongly with two targets simultaneously, though in these cases, the targets seem primarily complementary rather than contradictory. Jablonski (1988) examines more clearly conflicting demands for identification—examining the experiences of Roman Catholic women who also consider themselves feminist. She found that although women caught in this paradox continued to define themselves as both Catholic and feminist, they prioritized their allegiances. Individuals describe themselves as either a Catholic feminist or a feminist Catholic depending on which term provoked higher levels of identification. Resistance is another option open to individuals facing demands from organizations. Murphy (1998) studied how flight attendants resist demands from airline administration. She concluded that members who outwardly conform to organizational requirements may offer resistance through the use of “hidden transcripts” or backstage behaviors that violate rules and norms. Negotiating or resisting identities imposed by organizations is one way that members attempt to reduce the discomfort caused by conflicting demands. Little attention has been paid to the potential of ritual in negotiating paradox in organizations. This current study addresses that gap.
Stohl and Cheney (2001) and Ashcraft (2000, 2001a) argue for the generative power of paradox, explaining that the synthesis or transcendence needed to manage paradox may lead individuals and organizations to find solutions to problems superior to solutions arrived at in a less contradictory context. Eisenberg's (1984) concept of strategic ambiguity also embraces the potential productivity of addressing paradox. He argues that divergent goals are not necessarily detrimental and should sometimes be preserved rather than eliminated.

An additional argument for the creative potential of paradox is the ability of contradiction and conflict to contribute to the transformation of organizational culture. Van de Ven and Poole (1995) argue that dialectical theories of organizational change are based in the assumption that organizations exist in an environment of "colliding events, forces, or contradictory values that compete with each other for domination or control" (p. 517). These conflicting elements may be internal or external to the organization. The creative synthesis of competing demands allows a transformed organization to emerge.

Organizational cultures are characterized by both unity and disunity, and cannot be productively or realistically viewed as wholly united or wholly divided (Martin, 1992). Perhaps the most revealing and potentially useful studies of organizational culture are those that allow us to recognize how cultures persist and are transformed in the face of these challenges. Because of its attention to daily activities of members, this study adds to our understanding of how the tensions that are a constant feature of organizational life are managed, and how organizational members negotiate conflicting identities and transform their cultures.

Ritual and Cultural Transformation

In recent years, a number of scholars of organizations have investigated the forms and uses of ritual, often disagreeing about the definition (Knuf, 1993; Putnam, Van Hoven & Bullis, 1991; Trice & Beyer, 1984). Trice and Beyer (1984) conceive of ritual as "A standardized, detailed set of techniques and behaviors that manage anxieties, but seldom produce intended, technical consequences or practical importance" (p. 655). In their analysis of teacher bargaining, Putnam et al. (1991) embrace a similar definition and include as example of rituals handshakes, coffee breaks, and staff meetings. For these authors, rituals are habitual behaviors that serve social functions, but do not carry meaning or produce change; rites and ceremonials constitute the larger, more meaning laden patterns and incorporate elements of ritual.

The perspective on ritual that informs this study is similar to that of Knuf (1993) who challenges the above conception and argues for a more limited view of ritual that recognizes its strong influence in
organizations. Rothenbuhler (1998) maintains that ritual is communicative in nature, and that individuals use it to accomplish social goals. From this perspective, rituals are not simply patterned behavior but are efforts to use symbols to generate meaning. They also express the values and social relations of the organizations that perform them. Knuf (1993) argues that rituals are able to bring about both direct and indirect effects. It is this second conception of ritual that is most useful in understanding how ritual becomes a site of conflicting identities, a method for resisting unwanted identities, and a tool for the transformation of organizational culture. Recent work in women's studies, theology, and liturgies has investigated woman-centered rituals (Northup, 1996). Much of this work, however, operates on the assumption that women have separated themselves from institutional churches and are seeking alternative rituals (Ruether, 1985). This study contributes to our understanding of the role of ritual, because it asks how ritual enables members to remain loyal to the church while still finding space to embrace alternative values.

Considered in the context of the dialectical approach to change, ritual as prescribed by the dominant organization upholds and enacts the status quo. Weedon (1997) maintains that individuals can choose one of three responses to the discourse of a dominant group. They may embrace the discourse, they may reject it, or they may offer resistance "while complying to the letter of what is expected of" them (p. 83). Rejecting or strategically altering ritual creates a situation in which "opposing values, forces, or events . . . confront and engage the status quo" (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995, p. 517). Both Weedon (1997) and Fairclough (1989) maintain that changes in how members use the symbols of the dominant organization have the potential to transform the system. Fairclough argues that by systematically using elements of the accepted social order in creative and unique ways, symbol users may create long-term transformations of social structures.

The forms that rituals and their adaptations take, and how those rituals function, shed light on the values of the organization, on how members negotiate their place in the organization, and on how that negotiation leads to cultural transformation. In this essay, we explore ritual as a unique means by which organizational members may symbolically and materially resist those elements in a culture to which they object, and in doing so, reinforce and effect change.

The Transformation of Life in Communities of Benedictine Women

For Benedictine sisters in the United States, the story of the last fifty years has been one of transformation. Prior to the 1950's, the organizational structure and the values of women's religious communities were not significantly different from those of the institutional church. Sisters were constantly reminded of their spiritual superiority; the practice of obedience gave the leader of the community authority
over all elements of sisters' lives; and members were allowed very limited access to ideas or people beyond their community (Chittister, 1977). In short, the role of the community in the larger culture of the church was unitary. The values of hierarchy, superiority and isolation were shared by church and community.

An understanding of the dramatic changes in religious life over the past fifty years provides a compelling setting in which to study the role of ritual in negotiating paradox and transforming organizational culture. The sister formation movement and the Second Vatican Council each had a major impact on community values and practices (Quinonez & Turner, 1992). The Sister Formation Conference was formed in 1954 to address a Vatican mandate for improved teacher training (Wittberg, 1994). To help meet this goal, communities encouraged sisters to seek advanced degrees (Ebaugh, 1977). As they received more education and interacted with a broader range of people, sisters began to recognize their own abilities and their isolation from society.

The Second Vatican Council was convened in October 1962 with an agenda broadly focused on understanding the role of the church in contemporary society (Quinonez & Turner, 1992). Three council documents, Lumen Gentium, Gaudium et Spes, and The Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life, had the greatest influence on women's religious communities (Flannery, 1975). The first document abolished the idea that members of religious orders were in any way elevated above laypersons (Wittberg, 1994). As a result, sisters became mindful of the degree to which laity were excluded and disempowered by the institution. Gaudium et Spes argued that the church should be connected to the contemporary, secular world, rather than isolated from it. The practical result was that sisters began working closely with non-sisters, and were exposed to feminist practices and principles. The Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life instructed communities to undertake a process called "renewal" in which they were to examine how their practices reflected a balance between the traditional and the contemporary. The documents emerging from Vatican II seemed to indicate a new commitment on the part of the church to inclusion, equality, and empowerment—values embraced wholeheartedly by Benedictine sisters (Chittister, 1977).

American Catholics are familiar with the external signs of change brought about by "renewal." Sisters stopped wearing the traditional habit, and they began working in areas other than teaching and nursing (Chittister, 1977). Although central to identity issues, these alterations were surface evidence of the deeper changes that fed the paradoxes faced by contemporary communities. The values of inclusion, equality, and empowerment became foundations of life in contemporary Benedictine communities. Sisters' own exclusion from what they considered to be full membership in the church created a commitment on their part to full membership for all. Their new understanding
of the status system in the church lead them to be concerned that all Catholics, clergy or not, be treated with equal dignity and be given equal opportunity for participation. Finally, the adoption of decision by consensus in communities led members to see a need for that level of empowerment for all in the governance of the church (Chittister, 1977). The paradox between loyalty to the church and resistance to its principles and practices became glaringly obvious when communities found their decisions overridden by the church hierarchy that vetoed more progressive elements of the revised constitutions (Chittister, 1977).

Recent Vatican actions have only reinforced the intensity of the conflict between loyalty and resistance. Pope John Paul II issued a decree reinforcing male-only priesthood, and forbidding further discussion of the idea in 1994 (John Paul II, 1994). In 2001, the Vatican attempted to prevent Joan Chittister, a Benedictine sister, from addressing the first international meeting of Women's Ordination World Wide (Van Biema, 2001).

From Martin's (1992) perspective on organizational culture, members of Benedictine women's communities moved from a culture most easily described as unitary, into a culture that can be viewed as differentiated and fragmented. This shift is due in part to the conflict between loyalty and resistance that was born in the renewal process, and remains highly evident in the lives of Benedictine women. Sisters are asked to identify as both members of the institutional church that they perceive as hierarchical and exclusionary, and as members of a community of women committed to inclusion, equality and empowerment. Prior studies investigating how Benedictine women negotiate the paradox between loyalty and resistance revealed four primary strategies, each of which serves to negotiate tensions and work for change in the larger institution: decision making, ritual, community and ministry (Hofmann, 2000, 2002). This study explores the specific question: What is the role of ritual in negotiating conflicting demands between loyalty and resistance and transforming organizational culture?

Method

Participants and Contexts

With its focus on observation and the goal of understanding members' meanings, an ethnographic approach is well suited to the study of ritual in organizations (Emerson, 1983). Data for this study include interview responses, fieldnotes of observation, and community documents. Data were gathered in three communities between Fall 1996 and Spring 2001. The communities represented by data in this study are all large by contemporary standards (200–400 members), and all are transitioning from mainly educational ministries into a variety of areas, including social services and spiritual direction. The first author
interviewed 14 women in community A (labeled St. Catherine's), 26 women in community B (labeled St. Elizabeth's) and 27 women in community C (labeled St. Theresa's). Interviews averaged from one half hour to just over one hour in length. Participation in the interviews was voluntary. At St. Catherine's, an appointee of the prioress solicited participants. In the other two communities, the first author solicited participation of randomly selected members by mail. All participants were assured that neither the identity of individual members nor the identity of the community would be disclosed in the report of findings. Communities and participants are therefore identified by pseudonym. Names beginning with letters A through G indicate women who are members of St. Catherine's; letters H through P, members of St. Elizabeth's; and letters Q through Z, members of St. Theresa's.

The interview schedule consisted of 13 open-ended questions that were followed by additional questions prompted by the content of the interview, and was revised following the initial set of interviews. These interviews were part of a larger project on how Benedictine women negotiate the tension between community and church. During the first 14 interviews, liturgy and changes made in liturgy emerged as a central theme, leading to the addition of a brief series of questions for the remaining interviews. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed by both authors, resulting in 570 single-spaced pages of text.

The first author also spent time in each community doing participant observation. She spent five afternoons at St. Catherine's, assisting in housekeeping and groundskeeping duties, and joining the sisters for meals and prayer. She also spent approximately one week at both St. Elizabeth's and St. Theresa's, conducting interviews, living on the premises, and joining the community for meals, prayer, and social activities. These experiences resulted in 81 single spaced pages of fieldnotes. The final source of data for this study is documents such as the Rule of St. Benedict, Constitutions of the Benedictine federations, organizational newsletters, and programs from prayer events. All research procedures were approved by the appropriate institutional review boards.

Procedures

Our approach to the analysis of data is critical-interpretative, in that our aim is to understand how "persons both are shaped by and shape their worlds through interaction" (Murphy, 1998, p. 502). During and following the collection of data, a thematic approach similar to that of Buzanell et al. (1997) was used to identify themes in the data. According to Owen (1984), themes are identified by recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Recurrence is the repetition of an idea, even if the same terms are not used to express it. Repetition is the repeated use of the same term or derivation of a term. Forcefulness refers to
paralanguage, and is not a consideration in this study as the primary data were text-only transcripts. Following procedures based in grounded theory and embraced by ethnographers, the authors moved back and forth between emerging themes and relevant scholarship in communication, allowing the data to guide reading, and the reading to shape the understanding of the data (Creswell, 1998; Strauss, 1987).

Results

Analysis of the themes emerging from the data revealed that the loyalty/resistance paradox created by the conflict pairs of inclusion/exclusion, equality/hierarchy, and empowerment/disempowerment is evident in how women discuss and enact ritual. Communities make changes to ritual, and members talk about those changes in ways that indicate that the alterations are deliberate attempts to change meanings, manage contradictory identities, and effect change. In the sections that follow, we highlight ritual as a source of tension and as a strategy for negotiating paradox and transforming culture.

Traditional Ritual as Source of Paradox

Ritual is a central, daily practice for Benedictine women. It is, in Martin’s (1992) terms, a unitary element of community culture. Unlike apostolic communities of sisters, who first share a common ministry such as nursing or teaching, Benedictine life is defined by shared prayer and community life, out of which grows a variety of ministries (Conference of American Benedictine Priories, 1978). This view of ritual as central to community identity is consistent with the ideas of Knuj (1993) and Rothenbuhler (1998) who argue that ritual serves social functions and is capable of creating effects. In addition, liturgical ritual simultaneously makes visible points of agreement and points of disagreement with the institutional church. The centrality and regularity of ritual make the issue highly salient for members of the communities, thus making the conflicting identities more difficult to manage (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Although the commitment to liturgy is a shared by both institutional church and the communities, the actual practice of liturgy exposes points of differentiation and fragmentation. Liturgical ritual both emphasizes and negotiates the conflicting identities inherent in the lives of Benedictine women. By continuing to embrace the official liturgy of the church, communities and individuals express loyalty to the institution. At the same time, though, the adaptation made to traditional ritual functions as resistance to the church, and rejects the view of women as justifiably excluded, subordinate and disempowered. Changes to ritual reinforce and enact the ongoing transformation of the culture of Benedictine women.

In order to understand how Benedictine women adapt ritual, it is necessary to have a basic knowledge of the forms of liturgical ritual,
and how members feel about the church's practice of liturgy. Liturgy takes two main forms in monastic life—Liturgy of the Hours and the Eucharist, but Benedictine communities also have liturgical celebrations for occasions such as the acceptance of a new community member, for special prayer intentions, and for particular feast days. Liturgy of the Hours was the official prayer of the church until the middle ages when it was replaced by the Eucharist (McNamara, 1996). Liturgy of the Hours is the practice of praying an established collection of psalms, readings, and short prayers as a community three times each day. Liturgy of the Hours is led by sisters rather than by an ordained priest. Lay guests, both female and male, are frequently present for Liturgy of the Hours.

Community members attend Eucharist which takes place in the context of what is commonly called the Mass, from one to several times each week. Although daily Mass is attended primarily by members of the community, all Masses are open to any member of the public, and many non-members, both male and female, are present for weekend services. The Mass consists of the liturgy of the Word—readings and a homily, and liturgy of the Eucharist—the rite that enacts the belief that the priest transforms bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, and distributes it in the form of communion. As the most common ritual of the Catholic Church, the Eucharist contains references to many of the key theological tenets of the institution. Members of Benedictine women's communities also view it as a symbolic and literal representation of church philosophies and practices to which they object—most notably exclusion, hierarchy and disempowerment.

Women's exclusion from full liturgical participation is especially evident in the celebration of the Eucharist because a male priest must preside. As a result, the community, self-sufficient in all other ways, must invite an outsider to preside over one of their central activities. Sister Tonya explained, "But I think in general, the big tension is that there are times that we need to celebrate officially as a community and we have to bring somebody in to do that—to celebrate with us." Many women expressed similar frustration with the requirement. Sisters Keri, Lisa, Mary, Nancy and Pamela added that sometimes the priest scheduled to say Mass is unexpectedly absent. Sister Mary commented, "But again, it's times like that that I just totally lose it, you know. Because we're—we've got enough women who, in our community, that could very well preside over worship." The fact that many women see the gifts of their sisters refused because of church rules emphasizes feelings of disempowerment.

For other members, the male dominated language of liturgy calls attention to the exclusion of women. The church has established clear policies about language use (National Council of Catholic Bishops, 1997). There are two types of liturgical terms—horizontal terms that refer to people, and vertical terms that refer to God (McClory, 1997). It
is permissible to change some horizontal language to decrease male references, but it is not permissible to change language about God. Sisters object to male language on the horizontal level because it inaccurately describes the people of God, especially in a women’s community, and because it makes male the normative gender (Sister Paula). They argue that male language for God is objectionable because it creates a narrow vision of God and promotes the notion that men are superior to women (Sisters Maureen, Patricia).

Since the traditional rituals of the church—particularly the Eucharist, confront members of the community with a required male presider and gendered language, some women find it difficult to participate meaningfully in community prayer. Sisters commented that they might not attend Mass if they had to attend in a parish church. Sister Terry said, “I wouldn’t choose a parish. If I was ministering in a parish, I’d have nowhere to go. I don’t know what I would be if I had to take that day in and day out.” Sister Wanda commented, “If I were not near [St. Theresa’s] would I go every week? I don’t know that.” She explained that when the priest of the parish she was working in asked her why she went home so often on weekends, she said “well, it’s like this—Mass at [St. Theresa’s] is like steak and champagne, here [the parish] it is like beer and pretzels.” Sister Rhonda’s comments resembled those of several sisters who felt very strongly about inclusive language, “And I can live with that [exclusive language at work], but when I go to a place where there’s not even inclusive language, I can hardly pray.” Clearly, the practice of ritual, and what it represents for Benedictine women causes conflict.

The purpose of liturgy for these communities is to create a meaningful prayer experience in which members can draw closer to God. The traditional elements of power and exclusion inherent in traditional Roman Catholic ritual undermine that purpose for many members. As an official part of the church, communities are clearly interdependent with the institution and therefore face a situation in which they must find a way to negotiate the contradiction between values and practices, and between the identities they have crafted for themselves and those imposed upon them.

Adapting Ritual, Negotiating Paradox, Transforming Culture

By continuing to celebrate the Eucharist, Benedictine women reaffirm their commitment to the Catholic Church, but because they celebrate with adaptations, and pursue other liturgical opportunities they are able to express their dissatisfaction with the church as it is and enact in their communities the transformation they desire for the church as a whole. Benedictine women adapt the Eucharist and other rituals in three primary ways: (1) by enacting leadership roles in liturgy; (2) by using inclusive symbols; and (3) by honoring the contributions of women. Each of these adaptations attempts to minimize the
tension between exclusion and inclusion, hierarchy and equality, and empowerment and disempowerment. In making these adaptations, however, sisters create a tension between loyalty and resistance. We begin our discussion of the adaptation of ritual with a brief example that encapsulates the strategies used by Benedictine women. We continue by illustrating in detail the methods of adaptation, and providing evidence of the meaning of those alterations for members of the communities.

A sample adapted ritual. One prayer service, observed during a visit to St. Theresa’s, exemplifies all of the ways in which ritual is adapted. The ritual (1) was led completely by women, (2) incorporated both traditional liturgical symbols and key church teachings in unique and inclusive ways, and (3) celebrated both the contribution of particular women and the gifts of women in general. The service celebrated the feast of the visitation, which Catholics believe commemorates the visit of the soon-to-be mother of Jesus with her cousin Elizabeth who is pregnant with her first child (John the Baptist). Women served all roles in the service—they acted out the story, led the music, carried candles, performed readings and served the ritual meal. Traditional symbols were incorporated in the liturgy. Participants’ hands were anointed with oil blessed by all during the ceremony. Oil is a key symbol that is traditionally blessed and distributed by a priest. The service concluded with a shared meal including bread and wine, the pivotal elements of the traditional Eucharistic celebration. The prayers in this section of the service also suggested new twists on traditional church values. One portion of the prayer, as quoted from the handout from the ceremony, read,

Mary: Transformation, transubstantiation. /My whole being, /body and blood, soul and spirit, /living Eucharist.
All: All women, all our days, /Give thanks and praise to God.
Elizabeth: God always favors the favorless, those cast aside, /a burden to society, or of little consequence. /But a woman, least among least /is chosen by God to make God present.
All: She is our first New Testament priest.

In the traditional conception of the Eucharist, the priest is said to make Christ present through the consecration of bread and wine. The language and other symbols of this ritual support the idea that women have made key contributions to the church, and they should be allowed to participate fully in the priesthood—thus making an argument to themselves and visitors, and by extension, the institutional church, for inclusion, equality and empowerment.

Although not all adaptations are made in all rituals, the changes made in this service illustrate the three ways that traditional practice is adapted to de-emphasize values that members do not share with the church, while affirming those values they hold as most important.
Adaptations also model practices that the sisters believe should be enacted throughout the church, thus challenging the status quo and reinforcing their own ongoing cultural transformation.

*Enacting liturgical leadership.* Benedictine women resist being disempowered in part by claiming roles in liturgical leadership for themselves. One of the most notable differences between liturgies in these three communities and liturgies in Catholic parishes is the number and range of roles filled by women. Women claim roles in the Eucharist, Liturgy of the Hours, and other rituals; they de-emphasize the role of the presider; and they control the planning and performance of ritual.

Benedictine women enact leadership by serving in presiding roles during ritual. In many Catholic parishes, women are lectors, musicians, and communion ministers. Benedictine women serve these functions, but they also serve as presiders and homilists—roles that are traditionally, and in some cases by church law, reserved for ordained priests. The homily, which is to be given by an ordained priest or deacon, occurs during the Mass, and is a commentary on the scripture of the day. Although only ordained priests are allowed to officiate at Mass, in each community the prioress presides and sisters present homilies at a variety of liturgical celebrations. Community members reported that women preside on such liturgical occasions as funerals, professions (the ceremony with which new members are inducted), jubilees (anniversaries of professions), feast days, and holy days.

Sister Gretchen summarized the changes in roles at St. Catherine’s, changes that are typical of those made in the other communities as well, “But we do everything. We don’t need a male presider except for Eucharist and we have our own prayers. We give our own homilies on feast days and we receive our own sisters’ bodies and bless them.” Sister Jennifer said of the prioress at St. Elizabeth’s, “So she presides at a wake for a dead sister. She presides on Good Friday when there is no consecration, and it’s really very moving to have a woman preside, to have your superior preside at something.” Sister Judy also commented on Good Friday, “I think one of the most beautiful things is at our Good Friday service where the presider at the altar is our prioress, there is not a priest around for the whole thing.” Sister Karen called this service “moving” because of they key role of the prioress. These roles, although not usually enacted by women, are within the rules of the church. By taking advantage of all available roles, Benedictine sisters create a richer prayer experience and enact an argument for empowerment through the ordination of women.

In addition to claiming these legal, though unfamiliar roles, one community pushes the rules by having the prioress read parts of the
Mass. Sisters Sharon and Rebecca report that during the Holy Thursday liturgy at St. Theresa's, the priorress reads part of the canon of the Mass with the priest. Sister Sharon makes it clear that the community understands it is resisting church policy, "...some priests have said that they'll come here for every other service but not that one. Because they feel that is way outside the realm of what's okay with the diocese."

The practice of women presenting homilies, which is also outside church law occurs in all three communities. The women who preach usually have master or doctoral degrees in theology and spirituality, and comments from community members indicate that the sisters are well-qualified for the task.

An incident at St. Theresa's illustrates the role of women both as presiders and as homilists. Sisters Roseann, Violet, Stephanie, Zoe, Zelda, and Sylvia explained that one Sunday when the priest did not appear as scheduled for Mass, the priorress presided over a communion service instead. As is true of most Sunday services, a large number of lay Catholics were present in the congregation. A number of women told stories similar to Sister Stephanie's:

And then we just proceeded to have a communion service, but all the readings—I mean the Mass processed with everything except the consecration. We just took whatever we had out of the tabernacle and broke it up and gave it out. But she [the prioress] preached. She just talked about the scriptures. It was great. I mean at the end everybody in that chapel applauded.

Although the community did not violate the rules by conducting a full Eucharistic celebration, they did use the opportunity to allow their priorress to enact the role of presider and homilist. In doing so, they were able to demonstrate women's abilities to lead Catholic worship, and challenge the church imposed identity of disempowerment.

Unlike the Eucharist and other sacramental rituals, Liturgy of the Hours offers community members an opportunity for formal, public prayer that is not presided over by an ordained priest. Community members fill all of the roles in Liturgy of the Hours. They serve as prayer leaders, readers, and incense, candle, and cross bearers. Sister Jennifer said of Liturgy of the Hours,

Oh, that's definitely ours. Definitely ours. I mean that has our stamp all over it. Somebody was here the other day and I was showing him the oratory [prayer chapel] and he said, "do the priests preside?" and I said, "no, no, no, no, no, no, no.

Because women can fill all roles in the Liturgy of the Hours, the ritual allows them a space in which women can be fully included, empowered and equal.

A second way that women change the concept of liturgical leadership is by de-emphasizing the role of the presider. Whether the role is enacted by a woman or by a man, communities attempt to ensure that
the presider does not become the center of attention. Examples of how symbols function in this way will be discussed later in the essay, but rules about roles support the same point. For example, neither St. Elizabeth’s or St. Mary’s allow more than one priest to officiate at a Mass—a practice that is fairly common in parish churches. Sister Tammy explained that the congregation is considered the celebrant in the Eucharist, and multiple priests draw attention away from the key role of the people in the assembly. According to Sister Violet, St. Theresa’s creates liturgies that move away from the role of presider all together. She said, “But when we do other things, we have communion services or other types of services, we’re doing. Maybe we don’t even have a presider, because again, maybe that’s a male model.”

Finally, community members exert influence on ritual by controlling the planning of liturgies. Each of the communities has a trained liturgist who works with committees of members to select music and readings, make changes in language, and plan additional rituals. Sisters at St. Catherines’s and St. Theresa’s mentioned that the priests who say Mass in the communities take direction from the liturgist. Sister Anne said,

We have a chaplain, and he can administer the sacrament of confession and Holy Eucharist. However, his orders and his salary, et cetera, come from our liturgist who directs our liturgy, and so he is fortunately very responsive. If he weren’t, he wouldn’t be here.

Sister Zoe made a similar statement about the priests who rotate the Sunday liturgies at St. Theresa’s, “There will be four or five priests who have been invited here by us to celebrate Sunday liturgy because they accept our values.” Sister Rebecca commented, “And so we don’t ever have a priest who is not going to perform this [the Mass] as we wish.” Sister Sylvia expressed a similar sentiment, “Like they don’t come in here and run the show; they dialogue with our liturgist.” If they wish to stay within the Catholic Church, the communities must continue to invite ordained priests to preside at Eucharist, but they gain some control of their own liturgical life by carefully selecting and directing the priests.

Enacting liturgical leadership in roles and in planning serves two functions for Benedictine women. First, as above comments indicate, they allow the communities to create ritual that is more comfortable and meaningful for those who participate. Second, these changes demonstrate the capability of women in particular, and lay people in general, to make meaningful contributions to the prayer rituals of the church. Sister Nora stated, “We always give the homilies and the eulogies for our sisters when they’ve died. And I think that is a vehicle of, you know, of showing everyone—the lay people who are at prayers . . . that we’re capable of it.” Sister Violet explained that on the Sunday that the prioress in her community led the service, “afterwards, everyone clapped and said, you know, this was wonderful—one
of the best liturgies I've ever been to." The presence of women in traditionally male leadership roles changes the tone and meaning of the ritual for community members. Although the current governance system of the church denies women a position of official influence, adapting rituals allows them to create meaningful prayer and call attention to the injustices they see in the larger organization. The practice of enacting liturgical leadership clearly includes and empowers women and resists the efforts of the Catholic church to reserve such leadership roles for ordained men.

Using symbols inclusively. Benedictine women adapt traditional liturgical symbols in ways that resist exclusion, hierarchy and disempowerment. They make alterations to language, to the use of traditional liturgical garb, and to the design of space. The manner in which sisters at St. Theresa's open the "Lord's Prayer" is a striking example of changes in language for God. Each time the prayer was said, the opening address—traditionally "Our Father," was different. The leaders began with phrases such as "Our loving God," or "Our Caring Creator," and the rest of the assembly joined to say the remainder of the prayer. The only times the phrase "Our Father" was heard over the course of the week were twice at the Eucharist when the priest was leading. In a similar fashion, the traditional sign of the cross—"Father, Son and Holy Spirit" is often replaced by the genderless "Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier." Terms that connote rank or power such as "lord" are often eliminated as well. Similar changes are made in language used to refer to human beings. For example,"brothers" is replaced by "brothers and sisters," and "sons of God" by "children of God."

The hymn, "Sing a New Church" found in a worship aid from St. Elizabeth's, illustrates the sorts of changes sisters make to both types of language. Phrases such as "Rich in our diversity," "Male and female in God’s image, Male and female, God’s delight" demonstrate a commitment to inclusive language for human beings. In addition to its inclusive content, the hymn uses no gender-linked terms to refer to God. Language changes such as these are more unified in some communities than in others, but rituals in all three communities reflect a commitment to reduce exclusively male references to God and eliminate exclusively male references to humans.

Second, communities make exclusive symbols more inclusive by adopting and adapting traditional symbols of liturgy. For example, robes are the traditional attire of liturgical presiders, usually ordained priests. In keeping with their appropriation of roles, the prayer leaders, lectors, and candle bearers at St. Elizabeth's wear simple robes during Liturgy of the Hours on feast days. In photos of a community Eucharist, a woman administering a blessing is seen in robes.
Third, the design and use of the physical space in which each community prays illustrate that adapting symbols can change the meaning of parts of the ritual. In each of the communities, the space reserved for worship indicates a deviation from the usual focal role for the priest. At Saint Elizabeth’s, the recently renovated chapel in which the community celebrates Eucharist is designed in a circular style, with pews on all sides of the altar. In discussing the renovation of this space, Sister Pamela explained that the goal was “to create an area where the assembly was around the altar, and the assembly is the chief celebrant.” The circular design lessens the sense that the priest is on stage, and calls attention to the communal nature of the ritual.

The chapel at Saint Theresa’s is more traditional in design, but one major alteration clearly demonstrates the commitment to deprivileging the role of the priest as superior. In most churches, the priest sits in a chair on the platform with the altar. At Saint Theresa’s however, there is no chair on the platform. The priest sits among the people. Sister Rita explained that removing the chair was a conscious choice intended to indicate “that he’s from the assembly, one of the assembly.” Sister Zoe said more emphatically, “And they [priests] sit in the front pew. They are a member of the community—the praying community—they do not pontificate by sitting in a fancy chair up in the sanctuary.” Although there is a chair on the platform at St. Elizabeth’s the priest begins the service seated with the rest of the assembly.

Daily Mass and Liturgy of the Hours at Saint Catherine’s take place in a chapel called an oratory. Saint Elizabeth’s also prays Liturgy of the Hours in an oratory. These chapels are designed with rows of pews facing one another across an open area. Although this design is traditional, it also serves to direct attention away from the priest for portions of Mass. The lectern from which the readings are proclaimed is located at one end of the chapel, while the altar and the priest’s chair are located at the other. As a result, when the readings are being proclaimed, the priest is out of the range of attention of the assembly, and the focus is on the lector or on other members of the community. Changes in environment in particular advance the ideas of inclusion and equality for all members of the congregation, and symbolically for all members of the church in matters beyond liturgy.

Rituals are made more meaningful for participants by alterations of traditional symbols such as language, the trappings of the presider, and the environment for worship. All of these changes serve to create a meaningful prayer experience for the community that reflects the values of inclusion, equality and empowerment, and resists the church’s current practices.
Reclaiming women’s contributions. Although claiming roles and using symbols inclusively make women present in liturgy, Benedictine women also pursue inclusion and empowerment by placing emphasis on rituals that feature women. Working from the belief that women are undervalued in the Roman Catholic Church, communities add prayer rituals that call attention to the contributions of women in the history of the church. Sister Sarah explained that effort at St. Theresa’s, “We have...the Great Women Committee. Where we’re looking at some of the women and coming up with prayer options and things to really begin to pull them forth.”

The liturgist at St. Catherine’s commented that when the church calendar includes optional memorials of women saints, the community tries to recognize those because they are often omitted in the parishes. She explained, “we have Benedictine women that we focus on in the year. Their birthdays or their death days where those are brought to our attention. We’re mindful...of praying for women’s rights and the recognition of women’s gifts.” Women are also recognized in the Liturgy of the Hours. During a visit to St. Elizabeth’s, Liturgy of the Hours included prayers from Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich—both important women in the history of the church. By emphasizing women’s contributions, the sisters create a women-centered prayer event and direct attention to the abilities of women in the church.

Although each community adapts their rituals a little bit differently, all three focus on the same areas: (1) enacting liturgical leadership; (2) using symbols inclusively; and (3) reclaiming the contributions of women. Adapting ritual allows Benedictine women to negotiate the paradox between community values of inclusion, equality and empowerment and church practices. Sister Rhonda explained, “Sure I wish it were easier for people sometimes, but I think we’ve come up with some very creative ways of celebrating, sharing, and praying together because of that tension.” This reaction supports the argument that being forced to negotiate paradox can result in creative and productive answers on the part of communities (Ashcraft, 2001; Stohl & Cheney, 2001). By making changes to traditional ritual, community members are able to creatively negotiate the conflict between inclusion and exclusion, empowerment and disempowerment, and equality and hierarchy; and reinforce those values key to their transformed communities. Because individuals beyond the community witness and participate in these adapted rituals, sisters are also able to advance an argument for the transformation of the organization as a whole.
Discussion

This study contributes to our understanding of how members manage organizational paradox by identifying the strategic adaptation of ritual as a specific strategy for negotiating conflicting demands. In addition, the fifty year history of paradox and transformation in Benedictine women's communities allows for the development of a picture of the ways in which ritual is a both a unitary feature and an oppositional feature of life in these organizations. By maintaining the practice of celebrating Eucharist, community members affirm their continuing membership in the church. At the same time, adaptations allow them to reject the identity imposed by the church—one that defines women as rightly excluded, subordinated and disempowered. By tinkering with symbols, sisters create a space in which tensions are minimized, and liturgy can be meaningful. This function is supported by Weedon's (1997) argument that "... even when feminist discourse lack the social power to realize their version of knowledge in institutional practices, they can offer the discursive space from which the individual can resist dominant subject positions" (p. 107).

Although Benedictine women lack the power to quickly make the policy changes they wish to see in the larger church, sharing their adapted rituals with Catholics outside of their own communities allows them to support long-term change through the systematic alteration of the social practices of the organization (Fairclough, 1989). This is supported by Knuf's (1993) perspective that ritual has the potential to create direct and indirect effects in the world. Knuf also argues for the role of ritual in organizational change, "At the point when the building pressure for a major revision of the organization reaches its critical point, ritual provides the means to effect a qualitative... transformation and thereby preserves the larger aggregate" (p. 90).

The findings of this study support Martin's (1992) call for scholars to view organizations from unitary, differentiated, and fragmented perspectives. By examining points of similarity such as commitment to the practice of Eucharist, points of opposition such as challenges to language choices, and points of fragmentation such as the conflict some members feel about doing both at the same time, a more complete picture of what ritual and its adaptation mean for organizational members becomes possible.

Benedictine communities are unique organizations, however this view of ritual has implications for transformation in a variety of organizational cultures. If organizations are best understood as sites of paradox, then it is important that scholars understand how communication practices are used to negotiate those demands and encourage cultural transformation. The strategic adaptation of ritual is one such communication behavior. Tinkering with the practice of ritual, even rituals as seemingly mundane as the Wal-Mart cheer for example, may
create space for individuals to enact their resistance to values or ideas they find objectionable, and thereby enact incremental transformation in the organizational culture. Understanding how ritual works, and the power of its adaptation may put individuals in a position to use ritual to enact transformation. Although addressing metaphor rather than ritual, Smith and Eisenberg (1989) demonstrate that turning an organization’s symbols back on themselves can be a powerful tool in arguing for change.

Although the initial reaction of dominant organizations may be to enforce consistency in ritual, organizations could benefit by allowing some level of deviation on the part of dissatisfied parties. As long as members can construct rituals that are meaningful, they are less likely to sever completely their relationship with the larger institution. This conclusion reinforces Eisenberg’s (1984) argument that organizations can use “strategic ambiguity” to enable members to balance the paradox between cohesion and individual freedom. In the case of ritual however, organizations not only need to use symbols ambiguously for their own purposes but also allow ambiguity on the part of groups who need to find a balance between conflicting identities, or who wish to express their acceptance of core values in the face of differences over how those values are accomplished. Conversely, an organization seeking to end the affiliation of some smaller segment might clearly define acceptable parameters of symbol use, and perhaps even prohibit the adaptation of ritual.

These observations raise questions about the degree to which allowing adaptation of ritual discourages more forceful action on the part of community members. Ritual certainly can have hegemonic and ideological characteristics, and by allowing members to make changes in symbol use and meaning, the larger organization may discourage them from severing ties, or from taking action to make changes in policy or practice beyond ritual (Giddens, 1979).

A few limitations inhere in a study of this type. First, although 77 interviews in three communities create a fairly complete picture of ritual among Benedictine women, these data represent only one type of organization, and a unique one at that. Further study of ritual and cultural transformation should explore rituals across a wide variety of types of organizations. Second, for the organizations in question, ritual is an essential practice. The impact of adapting ritual will likely be decreased in an organization where ritual plays a less central role. Despite these limitations, the findings suggest that for organizations with strongly held values, adapting ritual is one method of negotiating paradox and contributing to the transformation of culture.

NOTES

1/Benedictine nuns are Roman Catholic women who live in communities guided by the Rule of Saint Benedict, a sixth-century Christian monk (Stewart, 1998). Sisters
take vows of obedience, stability, and conversion of life, and center their lives around prayer and community (Chittister, 1997). Benedictine women tend to take a more liberal approach to church doctrine and social issues than do many other orders of nuns. For example, Benedictine sisters often favor the ordination of women, and some are outspoken advocates for social justice.

REFERENCES


