

# An Interview with Mother Carla

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## **By Most Rev. Rima Tamaiparea-Puki**

*Mother Carla is the first priest for the Church in South Africa and consequently my first priestly daughter. I ask the questions of her that many have asked me. Here are her responses.*

**Archbishop:** Mother, it's an absolute delight to interview you. These questions come from a pool that have been asked of me since your ordination.

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There is a stigma against women clergy. I suppose in this instance because we are Catholics, it is unusual. Without further delay, please tell us a little about yourself.

**Mother Carla:** Your Excellency. Thank you for affording me this opportunity.

I am Carla van Aswegen (nee Balt); born on Valentine's Day 1978 in Newcastle, Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa, only daughter of Ian and Hester Balt, the youngest of two. My older brother is Ian (by two years). I completed matriculation in 1996 and joined the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) in 1997. I did my Basic Military Training in George at the South African Women's College. 26 years in service.

I have always had a love for the Church. I grew up in a Christian home (Pentecostal-Dutch Reformed) and in 2018 I entered the seminary and graduated with a bachelor of theology, 30 June 2021; received the Minor and Major Orders and serve as a priest of the Reformed Old Catholic Church in South Africa. I have applied to translate to Chaplaincy and am awaiting the finalisation of the process. 2024 I will begin a bachelor of theology with honours. Please pray for me. For the present, I serve the Church as your Vicar-General.

**Archbishop:** Some of the questions I have received have been: "how can a woman be a priest?" "What qualifies a woman for priesthood?" "A woman cannot be married to the church, if Holy Mother the Church is a woman – that's like being a lesbian... does that seem right?" Of course, there are roles for men and roles for women and the two cannot be mixed; not even cosmetics or surgery can accommodate this. What is your response to this?

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**Mother Carla:** Wow! The East and the West (at least the Latin Rite) have adhered to a men-only priesthood. The example given is that of ‘Christ calling twelve men to be apostles’. The Roman Church still holds to the notion that a priest must bear a physical resemblance to Christ to be *in persona Christi*. But who is to say that a woman cannot represent Christ? Our physical appearance does not hinder the work from moving forward, if anything women understand better than men what it means to bring about life - which is what occurs at the altar.

A male only church leadership exists in most Christian denominations and it is within the last 50 years that this has changed.

St Paul commends Phoebe, a deacon (as opposed to deaconess) to the Church in Cenchrea (Romans 16:1-2). He also acknowledges Junia as an apostle (16:7) roles that have up until then been occupied by men.

Now, I have nothing against men in leadership, neither am I a woman pushing a feminist agenda - that belongs to other credible people but to say that men alone hold the monopoly on priestly ministry should look to the role of the Blessed Mother. If a priest’s life is that of sacrifice, who was the first person to offer her Son, Who was and is the only sacrifice where humankind would be saved by His most precious blood? The prophet Simeon said that it would pierce her heart (Luke 2:35).

Julian of Helen once asked: “What is Christianity?” Christianity is the faith in God, who has entered the flesh of the world, becoming living humanity, spirit and body of everything. Consequently the presence of Jesus Christ among us, has sacred and divinised everything, because we are part of his very substance. Every single person, choosing to be in love, becomes the

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visible representation of the Kingdom of God on earth. The Gospel is the Word of love that is preached – a way of life forever.

**Archbishop:** You will recall the text from the book of first Samuel, when the Lord calls the boy prophet Samuel. How do you recognise the vocation or call that God has given you?

**Mother Carla:** Times are uncertain, it is written in the Bible (Isaiah 41:10). Times will be tough, that too is written in the Bible (John 16:33). My vocation however is certain, of this I am sure and I have heeded the call God has given me. He called me by my name and I answered with a loud “Yes”.

**Archbishop:** You are a wife to Corneluis; a mother to Beunette and Clara and your other four legged creatures, as well as serving the country in the military. How does your vocation benefit the lives of those who love and support you?

**Mother Carla:** I have always had a deep and profound love for people. Working in the SANDF, I understand the concept of tolerance and respect for people of other faiths and religious backgrounds, which implies freedom of religious expression and worship. I serve all, irrespective, in words and most certainly in deeds. Christianity is not restricted to words only. We have to be living examples and I pray that this will also be visible in my life.

No person who has a lamp, lights it and then puts it into hiding. The light is not mine but if it is given to me to take care of it and to ensure that it is useful to others – I must raise it up and share it with others (Luke 8:16-18).

**Archbishop:** In life there are great joys and sorrows. What have you experienced from ministry that have been sources of joy and sorrow?

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**Mother Carla:** As previously mentioned, times are uncertain etc... My family, my friends, my Husband and two daughters are my joys. Seeing people happy is a joy to me, being able to serve is a joy to me. Sorrow is part of life, I accept that but it doesn't rule my life. I choose to live life one day at a time in joy and with goodness. The rest shapes me, makes me better, allowing me to learn.

**Archbishop:** Where do you see the Church heading in the future? Do you think what this Church has to offer is of value to South Africans? Not everyone has a call to ministry, would you say there is a space for everyone?

**Mother Carla:** I pray that more will embrace the Church. There is much good that it offers and can teach people of all cultures and ideologies. It can teach those of other religions as well on how to look at their own theology and it also opens a world to us that we otherwise would not be exposed to.

It is true. There are some who have a similar vocation to me and then there are some who do not, but that doesn't stop them from coming to be part of us. Remember, if there is something that attracts you to this, it is Christ calling you home. This is His Church. It is His Work and those called to it have a divine right to be part of it.

**Archbishop:** Is there anything further you would like to add?

**Mother Carla:** I pray that God will continue to make me an instrument of His peace; He will continue to use me according to His will. I pray for the Church, that may it grow stronger, grounded in His will for us all.

**Archbishop:** Mother, thank you for the interview.