

of God. A feminist pair of eyes may well serve both to expose the past and to see where we should go.

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Eucharistic Presidency and Women's Ordination

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What is it specifically about blessing, absolving and celebrating the Eucharist which means that they cannot be performed by a woman? Why indeed should it be these three tasks, of all others, which cause so much concern? Are they not, after all, ones which depend least on our own human qualities? We indignantly repudiate any suggestion that the effectiveness of a blessing or the forgiveness mediated through absolution has anything at all to do with us: it is God who blesses and forgives. The power is all from him. Likewise, there is not a single authoritative Christian understanding of the Eucharist which suggests that it is the quality of the minister which controls the grace. On the contrary, in the classic phrase: 'the unworthiness of the minister hindereth not the effect of the sacrament'. It is Christ who comes to his people of his own divine charity, and the Holy Spirit which unites us with him through the receiving of the elements, and all as the gift of the Father's eternal will to save and redeem his creatures. No accomplishments are required to preside at this sacred interchange except the ability to say the words in which the Church prays to God for this grace and to perform the simple actions involved. By contrast, other ministerial activities, such as teaching, preaching, counselling and pastoral care, all palpably require human capacities of one sort or another which are not necessarily found in everyone.

Ironically, of course, teaching, preaching, counselling and pastoral care are activities which have been widely entrusted to women in, for example, the Church of England, which is divided on whether or not to admit them to perform the three priestly functions. This makes it impossible to rule out the ordination of women on the grounds that the eucharistic presidency should be confined to those officially exercising a pastoral and teaching ministry, since women already do this. Any decisive objection must be rooted, therefore, in the nature of the priestly state or the priestly actions themselves. To carry such

theological weight, priesthood cannot be, as some would regard it, a secondary matter of 'good order and godly discipline', but has to be seen as an integral part of the great mystery of faith, a revelation and mediation of God's love in creation, incarnation, death and resurrection, and in harmony with everything else we know of these things. In other words, holy order as at present received becomes an essential element in tradition, and any change is a change in the heart of Christian faith and experience.

Part of Christian tradition is undeniably that, until recent times, it was the universal practice of the Church to restrict ordination to men; and today it is still the practice of very much the larger part of Christendom. But this fact is seen as important not primarily as a truth about church practice but as witness to something deeper, namely a particular understanding of God's salvation. If we truly respond to God's will for us, the argument runs, we shall see that for women to preside at the Eucharist is contrary to the divine order in the world and in redemption. Society today may be out of tune with that divine will and order, but that makes it all the more necessary that the Church should not defect from it. The key to God's will is to be found in the fact that the eternal Son of God became human as a man; and what matters is the link between this truth and the eucharistic presidency.

If this is our perspective on the question, then the change involved in ordaining women to the priesthood, so far from being marginal or minimal, will be massive and could be disastrous. Those who argue for such ordination, therefore, cannot rest content with a purely pragmatic case. They have to engage seriously with the argument from tradition; and this of course they have sought to do, citing, for example, the words of Genesis, where the image of God in human beings is something given to us as creatures who include both male and female; the striking place of women in the Gospels; St Paul's dictum that 'in Christ there is neither male nor female', and so on. In other words, they are saying that the tradition is not monolithic, even in its origins. Turning to later times, they point to the leading and influential part that women have played in Christian history, often against the whole tendency of society at large: as heads, founders and reformers of religious orders; as mystics and teachers of spirituality; as missionaries and pioneers of every kind of active charity; as theologians, and as advisors to those in high places in the Church; in Eastern Orthodoxy as Christian rulers, counted worthy even of the title *isapostolos*, 'equal of the apostles'. At the same time, criticisms are made of the tradition on the grounds that it has often been distorted by the unthinking adoption of the values of the secular world with regard to the relative positions of men and women, in particular that it displays unhealthy psychological features of an immature male fear of women or aggressive suppression of them. In this connection there has grown up in recent years a radical and at times violent critique of Christianity from the standpoint of the feminist movement, and in

certain of its exponents this has led to a desire to transform the religion, especially in its idea of God, out of all recognition.

In all these ways the movement for the ordination of women has had to probe far deeper than mere reform of the institutional structures of the Church, and wrestle with fundamental matters of faith. But this raises another very important question. If we approach the tradition with one specific issue in mind, and if we ask it questions about that issue alone, we are liable to begin to misinterpret it. We may fall into the trap of supposing that our particular concern, in this case the place of women, has controlled its development far more widely than it really has. To take one obvious example: resistance to ordaining women to the priesthood in many cases takes its rise not from any theological reflection about women at all, but from a particular theology of the Eucharist which has developed without any reference to women or men as such.

It is not without significance that ordination of women as ministers began in Protestant denominations whose theology of the Eucharist was radically different from that which had evolved in Catholic Christianity. When representatives of the latter school say that the Reformation Churches do not ordain ministers as sacrificing priests, they are, of course, quite right; and any objections based on this sacrificial understanding of the Eucharist will seem quite irrelevant to those who regard it differently. Can the two sides, therefore, enter into meaningful discussion of what women may or may not do in the Church, until they have resolved their differences about the Eucharist?

In this connection it is interesting to remember the reactions to the report of ARCIC I on the Eucharist. What that report offered was a creative restatement of eucharistic doctrine in which both the Roman Catholic and Anglican members of the Commission could see something better and more positive than the formulas of the past, something which enabled each side to discover in a larger synthesis the partial truths which they had cherished, and to enrich them with new truths from other sources. While some welcomed this, there were those on both sides who rejected it because it had abandoned the words they were accustomed to use, and therefore must be regarded as contaminating the pure truth as they had been taught to believe it. This may perhaps be one reason why Rome has been guarded and even cool towards the work of the Commission, and why on the Anglican side, too, various Provinces of the Anglican Communion voiced strong preliminary reservations. The view has also been expressed that Rome, knowing that women had been ordained as priests in some parts of the Anglican Communion, and foreseeing that they soon would be in others, was negative towards ARCIC because it seemed both unkind and pointless to raise false hopes by approving the statements on Eucharist and Ministry when the door would have to be slammed shut later for other reasons. If this were true, it would only illustrate the point that in these documents the issues discussed were

not those of women's ordination at all, but rather questions of the nature of the Eucharist itself. In fact, there are real and profound differences of conviction about the nature of the Eucharist which the prophetic inspiration of the ARCIC members has so far been unable to heal. This has undoubtedly had practical consequences in the debate about women's ordination. But the eucharistic controversy is a difference of tradition in its own right, and should be respected as such.

This may be tackled in two different ways. One is to pursue the line followed by Commissions such as ARCIC, and work for a consensus on the Eucharist. Some real progress on this has been made on a world scale by the World Council of Churches, as evidenced by the Lima document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, which is being discussed at parish and congregational level all over the world. Since a large number of the Churches in the WCC do ordain women to their ministries, this clearly could be one way forward, even if a slow one. A rather different and more direct route, however, is to ask whether women's ordination is ruled out *even on the traditional Catholic view of the sacrament of the Eucharist*.

Both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theology teach that in the Eucharist the elements of bread and wine do truly and indeed become the body and blood of Christ, though Eastern theologians have not usually accepted the technical, philosophical explanation of this in terms of transubstantiation. To simplify matters, let us concentrate on the Roman Catholic eucharistic doctrine which is the most influential in the West among those who disagree with women's ordination on grounds of sacramental theology.

Put briefly, the dynamics of the Eucharist on this view are as follows. The priest, on behalf of the whole church, prays to God the Father that the bread and wine on the altar may become for us the body and blood of Christ, citing as his authority for this prayer the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, when he said of the bread 'this is my body' and of the wine 'this is my blood', and commanded us to do this as a memorial of him. By his actions and words on this occasion the Lord identified the sacramental bread and wine with his body broken and blood shed upon the cross; and thus in the Eucharist it is that sacrificial offering which is made present when God the Father grants our prayer and by the power of the Holy Spirit causes the miraculous transformation to take place. It is not correct to say, as Protestant critics of Roman theology used to do, that Christ is believed to be sacrificed again at every mass. The sacrifice of Calvary was indeed once for all but, because the broken body and outpoured blood are made truly present in the eucharistic elements, that one sacrifice is realized again in our midst and its saving power invoked for our salvation. That is why that Christian tradition speaks not just of the holy table but of the altar. The one altar where the sacrifice was offered by Christ was the cross but, because in human worship the place of sacrifice is traditionally called an altar, in Catholic

spirituality the place where Christ's sacrifice is made present is also called an altar; and likewise the person who offers the prayer in answer to which God makes the sacrifice present is called a 'priest', because that is what sacred persons who officiate at sacrifices have always been called.

Why, however, even on this understanding of the Eucharist, need there be any objection to the ordination of women as priests? What the celebrant does is to ask God the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit to make Christ and his sacrifice present in the bread and wine which are themselves the gift to us of the Father's love in creation. Everything is done by God the holy Trinity; and above all the sacrifice is performed totally by Christ, because it is his self-offering on Calvary to his Father which is made present among us—not anything at all that we do. The place, if we may use that word, in which his offering of himself becomes real here and now is in the bread and wine on the altar. It is by eating and drinking these that Christ's body and blood are received.

As a consequence, the liturgical action itself is also described as a sacrifice. The priest says to the congregation, 'Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the Almighty Father'; and the people respond, 'May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of his name, for our good, and the good of all his Church.' It is true the sacrifice which the priest 'offers' liturgically to God, the ritual act, is understood as worthy only because the substance and heart of it, the offering that is made, is the one perfect sacrifice completed by our Lord outside Jerusalem 1,950 years ago, and which itself represented in earthly terms the perfect love and devotion of the eternal Son to the Father within the holy Trinity.

The question, therefore, needs to be pressed: Why, on this understanding of the Eucharist, does the celebrant have to be a man? Surely all that is necessary is that the priest should be an officially appointed representative of the Church? In fact, the argument for the necessity of a male representative does not draw on this central theology of the eucharistic sacrifice so much as on a secondary elaboration of it, which has grown up over the centuries.

To trace the historical development of this elaboration would be a delicate and complex task, but perhaps its logical structure can be presented more concisely. If the sacrifice which saved the world was Christ's offering of himself to God in his death on Calvary; and if that is complete once for all, and nothing we do can add to it; then, when the body and blood are made miraculously present on the altar, it is that one perfect and complete self-offering of Christ which is present in them. At the same time the priest, by prayer and action, presents that perfect and complete sacrifice of Christ before the Father, and therefore can in a sense be said to offer Christ's sacrifice to God the Father. In the same way, devotion can speak of the liturgy as *our* sacrifice: the sacrifice offered to God by the people of God, through their authorized representative, is Christ's sacrifice, which God gives

us to offer to himself. But piety telescoped this cumbrous precision to say that the priest offers Christ's sacrifice to the Father. Almost inevitably, therefore, the point at which the offering is made comes to be thought of not as Calvary, miraculously recreated by God within the bread and wine, which is something invisible and difficult to grasp, but as the visible moment when the priest says the words of Christ and holds up the host to be adored.

Such language would, of course, be intolerable if it were taken to imply that the human minister in his own person offered Christ. There is, therefore, great spiritual pressure to think of Christ as present not just in the bread and wine but also in the sacred minister himself. If this is when Christ is 'offered' to the Father, then it must be Christ in some miraculous way who makes the offering. The priest, utterly unworthy as he is, becomes for that moment Christ himself, as truly as the mundane bread and wine become Christ's body and blood. The priest is *alter Christus*, a 'second Christ'. But if this is the way the invisible truth of the matter is conceived, it becomes psychologically very difficult to be at ease with a woman performing this liturgical function.

Another rather different line of thought which may well contribute to the same psychological difficulty is that which sees the Eucharist as a re-enactment of the Last Supper. This is something which may well be deeply, if unconsciously, embedded in Church of England piety. In the Book of Common Prayer we have the arrangement of the Eucharist which represented Cranmer's final thoughts in his revision of 1552. Here the prayer of consecration stops immediately after the words of institution. Once the priest has said, 'Do this, as oft as ye shall drink it, in remembrance of me', the worshippers proceed straight to the communion. In other words, it is as if they were in the upper room and Jesus was saying those words for the first time and they, like the disciples, were receiving the bread and the wine from his hands.

In our modern liturgies this dramatic reconstruction has been rightly abandoned. The Eucharist is not a repetition of the Last Supper. We are living in the world after the cross and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. What at the Last Supper was a salvation still to be achieved, has been achieved and bestowed and we are giving thanks for it, which is what Eucharist means. The remembrance we make is not of the Last Supper but of Christ's suffering and victory, which we remember before God as a prayer for the final and complete coming of the Kingdom. But Cranmer suppressed that aspect of the Eucharist: even in the prayer of thanksgiving after the communion he mentions only the cross, leaving out the resurrection and ascension which were in his medieval models.

All this has now been handsomely restored; and in this respect the new services are theologically a great improvement. But, among older church members at any rate, the Last Supper interpretation of the Eucharist could still be a powerful background influence; and, by a quirk of history, the present popularity of the westward position for the celebrant, making him so visually reminiscent of the figure of

Christ in pictures of the Last Supper, may well create the same image of the priest in the minds of those for whom the 1662 Book is unknown territory. If, therefore, the worshippers do consciously or unconsciously associate the celebrant with Christ at the Last Supper, it could again seem to them highly inappropriate to suggest that a woman should take that place.

To return, however, to the central Catholic theology of the Eucharist, the essential core of this is as follows: '... in the bountiful sacrament of the holy Eucharist, after the consecration of the bread and wine, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, true God and man, is contained truly, really and substantially under the appearance of the objects that the senses can perceive... by that form of existence which is possible to God, though we can hardly express it in words' (Council of Trent, Decree concerning the Most Holy Eucharist, c. 1). In short, *it is in the consecrated elements that Christ is present to be adored and to be received* in the supremely real mode peculiar to the Eucharist alone. This miracle is wholly the work of God.

But what of the sacred minister? Pope Paul VI quotes the famous words of St John Chrysostom: 'It is not the man who is responsible for the offerings becoming Christ's body and blood, it is Christ himself... The standing figure belongs to the priest who speaks these words, the power and the grace belong to God. "This is my body," he says; this sentence transforms the offerings,' (Encyclical Letter, *Mysterium Fidei*, 1965, para. 49). The Second Vatican Council teaches: '... Christ is always present in His Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of His minister, "The same one now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross" [Council of Trent, *ibid.*, c. 2], but especially under the Eucharistic species' (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, c. 7). Again: 'Through the ministry of priests, the spiritual sacrifice of the faithful is made perfect in union with the sacrifice of Christ, the sole Mediator. Through the hands of priests and in the name of the whole Church, the Lord's sacrifice is offered in the Eucharist in an unbloody and sacramental manner until He himself returns' (Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, c. 2). Again: '... priests must instruct them [namely the faithful] to offer to God the Father the divine Victim in the sacrifice of the Mass, and to join to it the offering of their own lives' (*ibid.*, c. 5). The thrust of these passages may be summed up as follows. The power and grace of God alone effect the miracle of the Eucharist. The sacrifice offered is Christ's, and he alone can offer it. The instruments through which God's grace and Christ's love for the Father work the miracle in the liturgy are the hands and voice of the priest. *But the miracle which is worked is to make Christ truly present in the bread and the wine.*

In *Mysterium Fidei* Pope Paul VI lists various ways in which Christ is present in his Church: at prayer, in works of mercy, in daily living, in preaching, in apostolic governance, and in the administration of the

sacraments, supremely the sacrifice of the mass. This and all sacraments are 'Christ's actions, and he administers them by the agency of men' (paras. 35-8). It is clear that this agency is not confined in all cases to ordained men, since in case of necessity a lay woman can administer baptism and it is still the action of Christ. Is there any theological reason why his action in the Eucharist should not take place through the agency of any duly ordained and authorized member of the people of God, which as a whole 'offers to God the Father the divine Victim in the sacrifice of the Mass', whether that member be man or woman?

Such agents are representatives not representations of Christ. The liturgy of St John Chrysostom has some relevant words on this subject: 'There are some who say: I wish to see Christ and His Face and His Features and His Clothing and His Sandals. But here in the Eucharist you see Him, you touch Him, you eat Him . . . It was not enough for him to become simply one man . . . He mingles himself with ourselves and makes us his Body, not just by faith but in truth and reality' (*Liturgy of St John Chrysostom*, Prayer at the Little Entrance, quoted in *The Thyateira Confession*, 1975).

An iconic theory of the eucharistic presidency, confining that role to someone of the same gender as the incarnate Lord, runs the risk of suggesting that Christ is present and active in the eucharistic minister in a unique mode and degree, an idea for which there is no basis in the general doctrine of grace or in specific authoritative teaching. By so doing it obscures the central affirmation of Catholic eucharistic theology, that Christ and his sacrifice are contained and communicated within the consecrated elements, and that that is where his people are to find, adore and receive him. Furthermore, it blurs the nature of the Eucharist by presenting it as a re-enactment of the Last Supper, rather than a fulfilment of the command there given to plead the sacrifice of the cross before God by the sacramental means proleptically provided.

These are serious distortions of Catholic belief. To admit women to the order of priesthood is the straightforward way to remedy them and to promote a truer Catholic tradition. If the only objections to so doing are the very distortions themselves, is not this the course which that tradition actually demands of us?

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