

47/4 (86)



SECRETARIATUS  
AD CHRISTIANORUM UNITATEM FOVENDAM

E Civitate Vaticana, die 17th June, 1986

Prot. N. 3098/86/e  
(in responsione ad nuntio italico romani)

His Grace  
The Most Revd Dr. Robert RUNCIE,  
Archbishop of Canterbury,  
Lambeth Palace  
LONDON SE1 7JU

Your Grace,

I thank you most sincerely for your letter of 22nd November 1985 on the question of the ordination of women. Especially I thank you for setting out so clearly the reasons why those provinces of the Anglican Communion which have proceeded to ordain women to the priesthood feel justified in so doing. I acknowledge that your letter is the fruit both of considerable reflection on your part and of consultation with the Primates of the Anglican Communion. That this matter has been taken up so seriously is a measure of the confidence that exists between us and of the progress that has been made to overcome the divisions between Anglicans and Roman Catholics. It will be especially important for those who have the task of continuing the dialogue between our Communion to understand the theological reasons why some in the Anglican Communion see the ordination of women to be justified and even required. It is equally important that something be said about the mind of the Catholic Church in relation to the ideas and arguments set out in your letter.

My purpose in this reply is not to enter in an exhaustive analysis of the questions which this problem raises. I agree with you that this issue cannot fail to arise on the agenda of the second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission which has the task of studying all those things which stand in the way of mutual recognition of each other's ministries. It is in that context and in that perspective that I too would envisage further study and reflection on this question taking place.

What I would like to do is to refer to some specific points made in your letter and I wish first of all to speak to a point you make towards the end of your letter. You say that you yourself are



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not convinced that Anglicans should go ahead with the ordination of women "until there is a wider consensus in our Churches". This observation seems to me to open up a profound theological dimension of this question. The ordination only of men to the presbyterate and episcopate is the unbroken Tradition of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Neither Church understands itself to be competent to alter this Tradition. In 1976, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in the declaration Inter Insigniores stated clearly that "the Catholic Church does not consider herself to be authorized to admit women to priestly ordination". The principal reason put forward in the declaration was that of Tradition. (cfr. Inter Ins. I-IV). The constant Tradition of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches has considered the practice of Christ and the Apostles as a norm from which she could not deviate. The practice of the Church to ordain only men embodies her fidelity under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to what was given by Christ. The declaration, together with the earlier correspondence on the subject between Pope Paul VI and Archbishop Coggan is where Catholics must look for guidance.

I am aware that some of those in the Anglican Communion who oppose the ordination of women give as their reasons that since the Anglican Communion is part of the whole Catholic Church, it cannot undertake so radical a departure from Tradition independently of the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches. The Anglican Communion, on this view, cannot act alone and may not prescind from the practice and understanding of the wider Church. I propose that this point of view merits serious reflection. The Catholic Church takes very seriously the considerable progress that has been made towards our eventual goal of full communion of faith and sacramental life. Our greater unity must be a fundamental concern, and it has to be stated frankly that a development like the ordination of women does nothing to deepen the communion between us and weakens the communion that currently exists. The ecclesiological implications are serious.

Having said this, I take very seriously your point that those in the Anglican Communion who have proceeded to the ordination of women have only felt able to do so on the basis of serious theological conviction. This I welcome, since it must be clearly stated that this is a theological issue and cannot be resolved on sociological



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or cultural grounds. The question of the rights of women to hold secular office is a quite separate matter and should not in anyway be connected or paralleled with the question of women's ordination. The context for that discussion is the context of sacramental theology and the tradition of the Church. My comments will, I trust, illustrate this point.

I have given considerable thought to the theological arguments for the ordination of women which you report. As I have said, I do not propose to deal in detail with this question, but I do wish to indicate why I consider these arguments to be unsatisfactory.

If I understand it correctly, the thrust of the argument is this: Christ is our High Priest. The humanity he assumed to accomplish our redemption was a humanity that included both male and female. That is to say, his humanity must be understood as an inclusive humanity, if the whole human race is to be able to enjoy the fruits of the redemption. Those who are commissioned as priests in the Church fulfil a twofold representative function: not only do they represent the priestly nature of the whole body of the Church; they also stand in a special sacramental relationship with the risen Christ. Especially in the Eucharist, they represent Christ. Since Christ's humanity is inclusive of male and female, those who represent Christ in the Church would do so more perfectly if their number included both males and females.

My first observation would be to note that the language used in this argumentation is the language of priesthood and sacrament. This makes it clear that what is at issue is precisely the question of sacramental ordination of women to the ministerial priesthood. It is important to draw attention to this, so as to make clear that this discussion is directly relevant only to those Christians who share this understanding of Christian ministry. For our two communions, the stimulus to our present correspondence is the "Final Report" of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC-I). That Commission claimed to have reached substantial agreement on the doctrine



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of ministry. So we are addressing a problem that arises in the context of real progress being made towards a common mind on the sacramental nature of ministry. In addressing this issue now, I write as one for whom the sacramental understanding of the ministry is part of the faith of the Church. The issue then, is the ordination of women to the priesthood and, that being so, it is clear that the question of who can or cannot be ordained may not be separated from its appropriate context of sacramental theology and ecclesiology. The practice of only ordaining men to the priesthood has to be seen in the context of an ecclesiology in which the priesthood is an integral and essential aspect of the reality of the Church. It is in and through the ministry of priests that the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ is present reality. So there is real continuity between the redemptive work of Christ and the priestly office exercised both by those in the episcopal order and by their collaborators in the order of presbyters.

I do acknowledge and welcome the fact that the arguments for the ordination of women which you report are clearly arguments of those who believe deeply in the important place of the ordained ministry in God's economy of salvation. But what I must seriously question is whether they constitute an adequate or proper understanding of that economy of salvation as revealed in the Scriptures and meditated and preached in the Church. I will give some indications of why I say this.

The picture of human redemption that is put before us in the Scriptures is of a God who is powerful to save and of a people who receive salvation as a free gift. Feminine imagery is used to reveal the place of the human family in God's plan of salvation. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel is depicted as the bride of Yahweh. In the New Testament St Paul speaks of the Church as the bride of Christ. In its tradition, the Church has understood itself in terms of this feminine imagery and symbolism as the Body which received the Word of God, and which is fruitful in virtue of that which has been received. Mary, the Mother of God is, in her response to the Word of God, a type of the Church. Christ, on the other hand, is the Head of the Body, and it is through the Head that the whole



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Body is redeemed. It is precisely in this perspective that the representative role of the ministerial priesthood is to be understood.

Christ took on human nature to accomplish the redemption of all humanity. But as Inter Insigniores says, "we can never ignore the fact that Christ is a man". His male identity is an inherent feature of the economy of salvation, revealed in the Scriptures and pondered in the Church. The ordination only of men to the priesthood has to be understood in terms of the intimate relationship between Christ the Redeemer and those who, in a unique way, cooperate in Christ's redemptive work. The priest represents Christ in His saving relationship with His Body the Church. He does not primarily represent the priesthood of the whole People of God. However unworthy, the priest stands in persona Christi. Christ's saving sacrifice is made present in the world as a sacramental reality in and through the ministry of priests. And the sacramental ordination of men takes on force and significance precisely within this context of the Church's experience of its own identity, of the power and significance of the person of Jesus Christ, and of the symbolic and iconic role of those who represent Him in the eucharist.

In saying this I wish simply to make the point that the arguments you relay cannot count as reasons for the radical innovation of ordaining women to the priesthood; the arguments do not negotiate the manifold theological issues which this matter raises. The possible future consequences of introducing such a practice at this point of time also require careful attention. This topic will, of course, continue to be a matter of discussion and in the context of the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue the most immediate question will be about how the ordination of women in some parts of the Anglican Communion affects progress towards fuller communion between us. We may not doubt that under the power and inspiration of God, whose ways are not our ways, and whose thoughts are not our thoughts, those deliberations will contribute towards the unity for which Christ prayed.

I offer you my respectful and fraternal greetings in Christ,  
Our Lord,

+ Johannes Cardinal Willebrands  
Johannes Cardinal Willebrands  
President