

A Consideration of Some of the Historical  
Objections to the Ordination of Women

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A contribution to the debate on the subject held at All Souls, Langham Place, January 1978, in which Professor Lampe and Deaconess McClatchey represented the Anglican Group for the Ordination of Women to the Historic Ministry of the Church.

No woman has any right to be ordained priest. On that we're all agreed. Nor has any man. But every Christian convinced of a vocation to minister God's word and sacraments has a right to have that vocation tested by the Church, and perhaps acknowledged so long as every Christian is a man. A woman may believe herself to be called by God to that same ministry; but our Church denies her the right to be tested. For her the ministry of the word and the ministry of the sacraments are split apart. Rightly or wrongly, our Church has long regarded the Pauline texts forbidding women to teach and to speak in the church as inapplicable to our modern situation. It encourages them to do all this and much more. But a woman may not say the Eucharistic prayer. She may perhaps preside over a religious community or an educational community. But she may not preside at the Eucharist which is her own community's corporate offering. She may engage in a ministry of counselling to the point where there may be an urgent need to declare authoritative absolution but at that point she has to tell the man or woman concerned to go to a male priest outside that particular pastoral situation. She may become a chaplain, she may be put temporarily in charge of a parish, but she may not hold a cure of souls.

Why Not? We've never been given a convincing answer. We're told, rightly, that it would be contrary to the unvarying tradition of the Catholic Church, a tradition expressed in medieval theology by the doctrine that a woman is inherently incapable of receiving the sacrament of Orders. But we have to ask the reason for that tradition. And the answer, formally stated by such theologians as Aquinas, Scotus and Bonaventure, is perfectly clear. Women, because of their natural state of subjection, don't possess that 'eminence of degree'

which is requisite for priesthood. The evidence of this is in Gen. 3:16, 'Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee', and I Tim. 2:12, forbidding women to teach and to lord it over men; and the Schoolmen combine this scriptural evidence with a sideglance at the findings of 'natural science', namely Aristotle's dictum that 'a female is, so to speak, a deformed male'.

It's sometimes said, astonishingly, that although the medieval theologians taught the subordination of women, and their consequent incapacity for priesthood, they couldn't really have thought that they were an inferior kind of human being: they venerated our Lady so highly that this was impossible. That is simply incorrect. No one had a higher regard for the Mother of the Lord than Duns Scotus. But he's typical of medieval thought when he says that even Mary shared in the natural inferiority that belongs inescapably to her sex. That's why she was not permitted to baptize her Son and he had to receive baptism from John.

If we don't really believe all this, and I imagine none of us do, then the whole tradition founded on it, ancient though it is, ceases to have any significance.

132- But, we're told, what matters is not what a priest does, but what he is. And a woman can't be what a priest is, because he represents God the Father, God the Son incarnate as the man Jesus Christ, and Christ as the Church's Bridegroom. How could a woman conceivably represent the Father and the Bridegroom? Now, of course, the priest does represent Christ and the Father. But the word 'represent' has more than one meaning. It may mean 'to be a representative', or it may mean 'to be a representation'. An ambassador represents the Queen. He acts in her name; he speaks for her; he is her representative. But he isn't a representation of the Queen. He doesn't impersonate her. He needn't be a woman to represent her. When a queen succeeds a king, all the male ambassadors, judges, mayors, and other representatives of the sovereign don't have to be replaced by women.

The idea that the priest impersonates God and Christ is very fashionable now. But it has no real basis in classical theology. The 'icon' of Christ in

the Eucharist isn't the celebrant. The 'icon' that mediates his Real presence is the consecrated elements, not the priest at the altar. This whole notion that the priestly representative must be male rests on a failure to understand the use of analogy, and of poetic symbolism, in religious language. When Ignatius saw the bishop as a type of God and the deacon as a type of Christ he was using the language of poetic symbolism, not literal description. 'Father' is an analogy which illuminates basic aspects of God's dealings with us. It doesn't mean that God is a literal, masculine, father. In the Incarnation God the Word took human nature, the nature common to men and women. He had to be either a man or a woman, of course; and had he been a woman he couldn't, in the circumstances of the time, have fulfilled his mission. But it's his humanity, not his maleness into which we are incorporated. Otherwise the female half of mankind wouldn't be redeemed. Nearly all the arguments against the ordination of women in fact turn out to be arguments against the baptism of women. This is specially true of arguments which purport to be deduced from the priesthood of Christ which is why we can ignore them now. It isn't Christ's maleness, but his deity and his humanity which are represented (not impersonated) by the priest.

The priest represents the Church, too. The Church is the Bride of Christ. If we followed this misuse of analogies and misunderstanding of the word 'represent', we'd be asking how a male priest could conceivably represent the Bride. But of course he can. Equally, a female priest can represent the Father and the Bridegroom.

Some people tell us that the objection to women priests is that a priest exercises oversight, and if he becomes a bishop oversight is his special task. Oversight implies headship, and a woman must not claim headship over men, for a subordination of the woman to the man is built into the divine order of creation. But if this principle is inherent in creation, it cannot apply only in the Church. It must hold good right across the board. Most of those who propound this

argument seem not really to believe in it. John Knox did. He thought that the régime or 'regiment' of women was always and everywhere 'monstrous'. But most of those who say that a woman must never exercise authority over men seemed to join the rest of us in celebrating the Jubilee. I didn't hear many protests that it was contrary to the divine order of creation. Some of them even want to put a woman into Downing Street. I profoundly disagree with them, but not on anti-feminist grounds.

Of course they reply: 'We can't be responsible for what goes on in the secular world, where women do often exercise headship and men perform subordinate functions. But at least we can ensure that within Church the divine ordering of creation is symbolized and set out by restricting priestly oversight to men'. But this is nonsense. If they really believed in their principle they could do much to promote it outside the Church as well. And the Queen's office isn't outside the Church: she is solemnly consecrated to it by the Church in a sacramental rite.

A variant of this view is that the Church, at every level of its organization, is a family. In most families the father is the head. So the head of the Church family, bishop or parish priest, should be a father and not a mother. But, again analogies are being understood as literal descriptions. The Church is like a family; God's relation to it is like a father's relation to his family. But it isn't literally a family, and God isn't its literal, masculine, father. It doesn't follow at all that God's representative to the local Church community need be a male person.

It's true that Jesus included no women among the Twelve. Naturally not. They were chosen to be the twelve symbolical patriarchs of the new or re-formed Israel: 'When the Son of Man shall sit on the throne of his glory, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel'. One thing a woman admittedly can't be is a patriarch. Then they

were to be witnesses to the end of the earth: not a possible task at that time for women. There's no evidence that the choice of the Twelve for their unique task was ever regarded as an exact blueprint for ordination to the local presbytery. If it had been, then when Gentiles were admitted to the Church Jewish Christians might well have used the kind of argument that's now addressed to us. They might have said. 'Jesus went out of his way to show quite extraordinary friendship to Samaritans and Gentiles. But he never chose one of them to join the Twelve. That's very significant. We've got to take it seriously. Let Gentiles and Samaritans be baptized, by all means, but if we allow them to be ordained as presbyters we shall be disregarding the implicit intention of our Lord.' But no one said anything of the kind. The reason why the early Church had no women presbyters was not because there were no women among the Twelve, but because in the Jewish and Roman societies of which the Church was part, women presbyters would not have been acceptable. Male superiority was taken for granted, and the Church could not then pursue the logical implications of the greatly enhanced status which it conferred on women by granting them full baptized membership.

A very striking feature of the early Church, it's said, is that, unlike the pagan cults, it had no priestesses. So if we now have priestesses we shall be reverting to paganism. Quite right. The Church had no priests either, in the pagan or the Jewish sense. No one is proposing to institute Jewish or pagan priest-hoods, male or female, in the present-day Church. Those who speak of women ministers of the word and sacraments as 'priestesses' are simply using that word as a term of abuse.

Some say that the ordination of women ought at least to be delayed until we have much clearer ideas of what their role in the ministry should be. I agree that the priestly ministry should become more diversified. It may be that few women will want to become parish priests and few parishes may want them. But it's men and women priests together who will have to work out diversified

and complementary forms of ministry. It can't be left to an all-male priesthood to decide what roles women should play, and then invite them to come and be slotted into them.

The only serious reason we've been given is that it would hinder progress towards Church reunion. It may perhaps delay union with Rome and the Orthodox. But at the time of the Anglican/Methodist scheme we were constantly being exhorted not to purchase unity at the expense of truth. And the truth is that within our Anglican Communion we already have a number of women priests; very many of us believe that it is God's will that in this country we should follow suit; a majority on our General Synod has already declared that there are no fundamental objections. This is the Anglican Communion with which Rome and the Orthodox have to contemplate unity. To pretend it isn't so, by refraining from taking the action we believe to be right, is exactly that 'papering over of the cracks' which we used to be told to avoid at all costs.

To say that this step mustn't be taken by one branch of the Catholic Church unilaterally, that we must wait for a General Council, is totally unrealistic. A General Council presupposes an already united Church, a Church which has solved its ecumenical problems, including in principle this one. Neither Rome nor the Orthodox have ever postponed taking any action in matters of faith or practice to wait for us to join them in a General Council. To plead that we should take that course is simply to ask for this issue to be put off to the Greek Kalends.

It isn't true, of course, that Rome is solidly against the ordination of women. The declaration of some 1300 American priests last year is evidence to the contrary. Many influential Roman theologians support us. Some of the best literature on our side is Roman Catholic. It is said that some 7/8 of the Christian world is against us. I suppose this figure

includes the whole Roman Catholic world on that side, perhaps also the entire population of the Soviet Union as Orthodox. But have all the congregations in rural Spain or the Balkans had the pros and cons objectively placed before them? Have they recorded their considered verdicts? Until they have, this talk about overwhelming numbers being against us amounts to precisely nothing.

Lastly, we're told that if our Church takes this step there will be schism. Now, it may turn out that after the decision, whichever way it goes, some of us on one side or the other may feel that the decision has been so contrary to God's will that they must in conscience leave the ministry, or even the Church. But even at the level of a governing body or a parish council it's usually held that to threaten to resign, before a decision is taken, if one doesn't get one's way is to exert improper pressure. To threaten in advance to disrupt the Church is like power workers threatening to close down the country before negotiations have begun. Perhaps the temptation on our side is to exert improper pressure through illegal direct action, like that of some American bishops who ordained women before their Church had decided to allow it. Let me say, then, that the group to which Dss. McClatchey and I belong has always insisted, down the years, that within this country the ordination of women must come about only through the due processes of Church and civil law.

Of course, if we unanimously decided to ordain women, or unanimously decided that that would be wrong, unity would be easy. But we've got to go on living with controversy. It won't soon be ended. And we've got to go on living together. If our brotherhood in Christ isn't strong enough in our Church to hold it together, it hardly seems worth while to ordain anyone to its ministry, male or female.

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