

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN

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FOREWORD

This report prepared by the Committee on Pastoral Research and Practices, has been approved for publication by the Administrative Committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The report is not definitive. It deals only with the question of ordination to diaconate and priesthood, leaving aside the question of installation of women in ministries of lector and acolyte. It is a contribution to the continuing dialogue on a subject of great importance. Its purpose is to encourage further study and discussion while making honest efforts to identify the major questions which must be examined in depth before conclusive answers can be given.

We are conscious of the deep love for the Church which underlies the growing interest of many women in the possibility of ordination. Our own appreciation of their indispensable contribution to the life of the Church underlies this effort at honest dialogue.

Other churches are also engaged in a study of this question. While their reflections have been helpful to us, we hope that ours may be helpful to them.

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The question of ordaining women is an old one in the Church, but it has not yet been thoroughly researched for Catholic Theology. There is no explicit authoritative teaching concerning the ordination of women that settles the question.

The topic should be given exhaustive study. The theological reasons for and against the ordination of women need to be developed in careful and objective fashion. A thorough study is required not because of sociological trends, but because of developments in the Church within the past decade. The Encyclical *Pacem in terris* (#41) in 1963 listed the emancipation of women as a positive development of modern times. *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (#9; #29) in 1965 rejected any discrimination based on sex. The admission of women as auditors to the last two sessions of Vatican II (1964-65), the proclamation of St. Theresa of Avila as Doctor of the Church (1970), the discussions on this subject in the Third Synod of Bishops (1971)—these trace a considerable recent development concerning woman's role in the Church.

The revelation given in Galatians 3, 28 shows the equality before God of every Christian: "There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus." In the Church then there is no distinction of persons: discriminatory lines have been erased by Christ. In the Church there can be no discrimination.

The basic text and basic teaching, however, do not mean that there are not different ministries in the Church, or that one ministry is to be preferred over another—as the same St. Paul taught in 1 Cor 12, 4-14, 1.

In spite of this doctrine of the equality of all in Christ, no woman has ever been pope, bishop or priest. At the present time it cannot be proven or disproven that women were ever ordained deacons. It is Church law (Canon 968) that women are not eligible for Orders.

Several scriptural and theological justifications have been proposed to explain why women are not eligible for ordination. They are here listed—in a general order of increasing importance—with some brief comments.

1. In the Old Testament, authentic priesthood was limited to males. The Aaronic priesthood and the levitical service (a service somewhat analogous to the diaconate) were similarly limited to males (cf. Exodus 28; Leviticus 8). This was in keeping with the strongly patriarchal Hebrew society. Because we accept the Law as invested with

divine authority, we accept this limitation of Old Testament priesthood to men of one family within one tribe of Israel as expressing God's Will for the Old Testament. The exclusion of most males and of all females was then also God's Will. This entire presentation, however, seemingly has no direct bearing on the issue at hand. We of the New Testament are studying the Will of God concerning the New Testament priesthood of Jesus Christ.

2. In the New Testament there is mention of a woman who was called "deaconess" (Rom 16, 1) and of other women serving as deacons (1 Tim 3, 11). Similarly in the early centuries of the Church, and especially in the East, there were deaconesses. Unfortunately no clear conclusions can be drawn from this information. There is no way at present to determine whether these women were called by this title in a formal or an informal way, whether the women in Scripture were wives of deacons who aided their deacon husbands, whether they were ordained, whether any ordination they received was sacramental, etc. The uncertainty of Scripture scholars concerning an "order" of deaconess is illustrated in the Jerome Biblical Commentary, 53:136; 57:21. A similar uncertainty seemingly exists concerning the deaconess in the early Oriental Church. This deaconess tradition is helpful in approaching the present question. However, we must beware of constructing a case for or against the sacramental ordination of women on such fragmentary and indefinite information.

3. Saint Paul repeatedly directed that women hold to a subordinate position in the Church, keep silence in the Church, keep their heads covered, tend the home and family, etc. (cf. 1 Cor 11, 2-16; 14, 33-36; Eph 5, 22-24; Col 3, 18; Titus 2, 5; cf. 1 Pet 3, 1-7). There seems to be little question but these texts are of Pauline authority alone. The developments of the past decade in the Church listed in this letter, and the authorized functioning of women as lectors and commentators, further demonstrate that these Pauline texts should not be cited as arguing against the ordination of women.

4. The New Testament doctrine on "headship" as reflected in the order of creation is given to justify the leadership of men and the subordination of women in the Church (cf. 1 Cor 11, 3-12; 1 Tim 2, 8-15). This same reasoning is advanced to explain the ordination to the priesthood of men but not of women. This doctrine of the dependence of woman on man is seemingly the teaching of Genesis (cf. JBC 2:18) as well as of Saint Paul (cf. *supra*). However, much further study is needed before conclusions can be drawn.

5. The Incarnation is given as a reason for the ordination of men only. The Word of God took on flesh and was made man—as a male. This then was the divine plan. It is stated that this divine plan is expressed in the priesthood, because the ordained priest must act officially in the person of Christ (cf. *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, #2). It is argued that a male priest is required to act in the person of the male Christ.

6. The selectivity of Christ and of the early Church presents another approach. It is known that Jesus did not hesitate to contravene the Law and sociological customs of his times. Yet Jesus selected only men as his apostles and disciples. Further, the replacement for Judas was to be specifically one of male sex (Acts, 1, 21 in the Greek), even though women who fulfilled the other conditions were present and available. Similarly the seven assistants to the Apostles (Acts 6, 3) were all men, even though the work was to be that of serving widows. This limitation to men, it is argued, goes beyond sociological conditions of that day and points to a divine choice.

7. Revelation is made known to us from Tradition as well as from Sacred Scripture (cf. *Constitution on Divine Revelation*, #8-10). It is then necessary for theology in this question to look to the life and practice of the Spirit-guided Church. The constant practice and tradition of the Catholic Church has excluded women from the episcopal and priestly office. Theologians and canonists have been unanimous until modern times in considering this exclusion as absolute and of divine origin. Until recent times no theologian or canonist seemingly has judged this to be only of ecclesiastical law. It would be pointless to list the many authorities and the theological note that each assigns to this teaching. However, the constant tradition and practice of the Catholic Church against the ordination of women, interpreted (whenever interpreted) as of divine law, is of such a nature as to constitute a clear teaching of the Ordinary Magisterium of the Church. Though not formally defined, this is Catholic doctrine.

These seven approaches have been used to document the exclusion from ordination of women. From them we attempt to draw six somewhat tentative conclusions:

1. Reasons #5 and #6 call for considerable further study in order to measure their validity.

2. Reason #7 is of ponderous theological import. Its force will not be appreciated by those who look for Revelation and theology in Scripture alone, and who do not appreciate Tradition as a source of theology. Because of Reason #7 a negative answer to the possible ordination of women is indicated. The well-founded present discipline will continue to have and to hold the entire field unless and until a contrary theological development takes place, leading ultimately to a clarifying statement from the Magisterium.

3. This question is extraordinarily complex. It is influenced by the individual's point of departure, viewpoint and choice of terminology. Even in this study some helpful distinctions have not been spelled out for the sake of brevity. It would seem that neither Scriptural exegesis nor theology alone can give a clear answer to this question. The ultimate answer must come from the Magisterium, and the current question is whether the Magisterium (as Reason #7 explains) has already given a definite and final answer. And at this level of doubt, only the Magisterium itself can give ultimate clarification.

4. It is possible to draw distinctions between the diaconate and the episcopal-priestly order, and within the diaconate itself. Assuming that the diaconate is of ecclesial and not divine institution, and that it can be separated from the Sacrament of Orders, it would seem possible that special study be given to the possibility of a diaconate of service, non-sacramental and non-liturgical, which would be conferred on women. It has been noted that Pseudo-Denys in the 5th Century made such a distinction within the diaconate.

5. Some contemporary writings on this subject approach priestly ordination as "power" rather than service, and speak of a "right to ordination." Such views appear to overlook the clear doctrine that priestly ministry is service to the People of God, that no Christian has any right to ordination, and that it involves the mystery of God's free election. One who is not an ordained priest is not thereby a lesser Christian, a lesser minister, or a victim of discrimination. In the Church there are many ministries, but all Christians do not have all charisms, and the hearts of all should be set on the greater gifts of God's love (1 Cor 12, 4-13, 3). Further, all Christians share in the common priesthood of the faithful (cf. *Constitution on the Church*, #10); from among these some are chosen by God to minister to the others by priestly service. In such a context should this question be presented.

6. Beyond the question of theological possibility is the further consideration of what is pastorally prudent. For the present, however, we can see from theology only a continuation of the established discipline. Considering the strength of that discipline and the numerous uncertainties detailed in this paper, the needed study on this question is now just beginning. As is evident, every one of the points listed in this report calls for a major study.

The German theologian Ida Friederike Gorres reminds us that it is God's Will and plan that must be determinant in this question:

The Catholic priesthood is a unique phenomenon, springing solely from the faith, the doctrine, the history, the growing self-consciousness of the Church: not from the religious needs of the Catholic people, certainly not from any principles or theories concerning the rights of men and women, nor yet from the necessity of particular functions which could be assigned at will to various persons. The one and only exemplar of the Catholic priest is the living person of Jesus Christ, in his relationship to the Church: in the mystery of the one, perfect, indissoluble life he leads with her. (*The Catholic Transcript*, Dec. 17, 1965).