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4 Christ, Revelation, and the Ordination of Women

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Because Christian ministry in its very essence is a sending by Christ, no person — male or female — exercises a right in respect to it. No one has a right to ordination, and no one can demand ordination. Vocation, from the first calling of the disciples by Christ, has been seen as a call from God, not an impetus from human beings. Even when a person has felt called by God, the church has judged (as best it could) whether or not the call be genuine. It would be a perversion of its nature and a betrayal of its mission if the church were pressured by outside forces to act contrary to its mind in such a matter. Christ, not the social factions of the day, is the head of the body. That having been said, the question presently facing the church is, what kind of considerations *prior* to those of a given person preclude ordination? Does, for example, being female preclude it?

-- I --

Let us look first at some of the arguments which are used against ordaining women to the presbyterate and episcopate.

1. Throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition God the Creator has been referred to as the Father. Does not the Fatherhood of God give a uniqueness to a male typology and symbolization of God? As such, only males should be commissioned by ordination in the Father's name for the roles assigned to

- presbyters and bishops in the liturgical and hierarchical life of the church.
2. In the Incarnation, the Word took flesh as a male; thus only a male can sacramentally share in and represent the priesthood of Christ.
 3. Christ chose only men to be apostles.
 4. The church is the bride of Christ, and presbyters and bishops represent Christ to the church; women cannot represent the bridegroom.
 5. Equality between the sexes is not the same thing as identity of the sexes; "equality" does not mean "to do the same thing." The ordination of women within the church involves different issues than those addressed by the women's liberation movement in the secular community.
 6. Because of the respect for tradition in the Roman Catholic Orthodox, and Anglican Churches, none of the aforementioned Churches should unilaterally move to ordain women as priests or bishops. Contemporary ecumenical consensus is necessary for such a radical departure from tradition. Moreover, there would be serious ecumenical consequences for any Anglican Church with the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches if an Anglican Church unilaterally ordained women to an order of ministry other than the diaconate.

Prior to presenting the positive argument which convinces me that women should be able to be ordained to all orders of ministry, I will respond briefly to the just-listed contrary arguments which are already in the field.

First of all, the Fatherhood of God does not seem to be an adequate basis upon which to exclude women from ordination to the priesthood because "Fatherhood," when applied to God, itself transcends masculinity: God transcends sex in its entirety. The key to the issue in this regard seems to be whether the ordained priesthood should primarily testify to God the Father's transcendence of everything created (including sex) and to God the Son's transcendence of the Old Testament priesthood, or primarily testify to the descriptive, historical mode of God's presence in the man Jesus Christ.

That God's immanence in the world depends upon his transcendence — that God's presence with us depends upon his

difference from us — seems to give the primacy to God's transcendence. God's difference from us is always the first thing which must be stressed about him: only so can we begin to comprehend his love in coming to us.

Concerning the second argument that the Word took flesh as male, it has well been pointed out by Dr. E. L. Mascall that it was "male human nature" not a male human person in which the Word became flesh. Jesus was not a good man adopted by God. On the other hand, Jesus was conceived in the womb of a "female human person." If the Gospel story of the virgin birth is accepted as historically descriptive of the birth — instead of being only a device for stating the religious truth that God is Jesus' Father — then Jesus' birth as a male takes on special significance. In a parthenogenic birth the child would have to be a female; if a son were born to a virgin by divine initiative, the genetic change involved would indicate a special purpose of God.

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Granting all that has just been said, however, God the Father might have explicitly chosen (and achieved by a virgin birth) to en flesh the Word in male humanity for reasons we would think of today as "social" rather than "theological." The fact that only male witnesses were juridically acceptable at the time, and the fact that Jesus came to bear witness to the Father, would be sufficient grounds for the Father's choice. But we must admit that such a reason might not have been sufficient ground for that choice either. The inconclusiveness of our arguments should be acknowledged. The point is, the actual choice of the Father of male human nature does not *necessitate* one theoretical explanation by human beings as over against another. Once more, the transcendence of God's Fatherhood precludes our assuming too much for any human typological interpretation of his acts.

Moreover, even though the Word became flesh in the man Jesus, the human condition redeemed in Jesus contains within it the masculine and feminine polarities. There is no doubt that these two polarities are found within the redeemed community, the mystical body of Christ, and within the general, royal priesthood of the church.

It is argued by some that sexual difference prevents a woman from presenting Christ's priesthood and from participating in that priesthood in the ordained, representative order. This con-

tention can be sustained, however, only if it can be further shown that there is a sense in which Christ's priesthood is restricted to masculinity. Here the transcendence of God and his revelation to human beings in Christ again enters the picture. As Christ's priesthood fulfills, surpasses, and terminates the Old Testament priesthood, the exclusion of women from the latter does not seem, in itself, to exclude women from the former. The transcendence of, and difference of Christ's priesthood from, the Old Testament model might well be shown by the inclusion of women — someone different — in it.

The argument against ordaining women to presbyteral and episcopal ministries I think the strongest is the one noting that Christ chose only men to be his apostles. The argument is strong because its basis is descriptive rather than theoretical; it begins with a premise that everyone must accept. To depart from Christ's action in this regard is to change the *descriptive* norm of the Bible. The Bible has been and remains a source of immediate comfort to people because it is not a theoretical text arguing to certain debatable conclusions. It is a book of testimony and witness about something which is claimed actually to have happened; the historical description of life and death which it contains is something with which we can immediately identify in our own lives. An argument based on Christ's actual choices, therefore, is an argument based on the Bible's highest level of Christian conviction: it is based on a description of what actually happened.

One cannot argue against Christ's actual choices, for Christ has already made them. Granting the descriptive fact, however, one may still ask whether or not the action described in time past was meant to be a norm for all future time. We should again recall that only men could serve as witnesses in court in our Lord's time and culture, and the apostles were sent to be witnesses. An analogy is sometimes offered between Christ's attitude about slavery and the fact that he chose no women to be his apostles. The contention runs that as our Lord accepted slavery — and we no longer accept his lead there — so, although he chose only men to be his apostles, we need not follow his lead there either.

The analogy is not a good one, however, because too many extraneous elements can influence it. Too much depends upon a presumed knowledge of the intimate mind of Christ. Christ's

attitude toward slavery refers to an effect of his proclamation on society; besides, there is good reason to believe that Christ himself expected the parousia soon to occur. The choice of his apostles, on the other hand, involves Christ's own "initiative of revelation" — not its effect on society.

For the reasons suggested above, I believe no interpretative argument for the ordination of women will ever have the immediate conviction of a description of the acts of Christ himself. That does not deny the possible truth of an interpretative argument about his acts, but it does state a fact proponents of the ordination of women should recognize.

The argument that the church is the bride of Christ and that women cannot represent the bridegroom has an immediate appeal and consistency. The argument is attenuated, however, when we go on to consider that the existence of holy orders is coterminous with the existence of the church in this world. Orders are sacraments, and sacraments are sacraments of the church. All orders of clergy stand within the church and so all orders necessarily partake of the nature of the bride, even when men are ordained to the orders.

I most heartily concur with the fifth contention that "equality" does not mean "identity." In the order of redemption women are in no way inferior to men, and differences between men and women must not be ranked on a scale of superiority and inferiority. The oft quoted text from Galatians 3:38 in which there is said to be no such thing as male and female in Christ contextually refers to initiation into Christ, in contrast to the initiatory rite of circumcision in the Old Testament. To try to argue from this text to the ordination of women is, in my opinion, to extrapolate beyond the intention of the text.

A difficulty permeating all discussion of the equality through difference of the sexes is present-day confusion about the nature of sexuality itself. Some people and schools of thought are clear about the matter, but there is little consensus among the totality of people and schools. Conflicting and competing views on the nature of sex are a complicating factor in the issue facing the church which the church will not be able to resolve by its own decision — whatever that decision is. Data will come from beyond its competence.

Finally, concern for tradition in the life of the Anglican Communion along with the Roman Catholic and Orthodox

Churches, is an undeniable fact and should not be taken lightly. Tradition is a community's lived fidelity to itself; Christian tradition must be fidelity to Christ. But the merit attaching to respect for tradition is based upon respect for the truth which tradition preserves. In the final analysis, it must be truth — tradition insofar as it is true — which the church follows in the name of Christ, not just custom. If the church (or a church) is convinced that something is true, departure from custom to embrace the truth must be construed as life in the Spirit of tradition. The departure would be from *a* tradition, not *the* tradition.

A truly ecumenical council of the church is desirable at any time about any major issue in the life of the church. But the realities of the church and the world being what they presently are — that is to say, the sin of human beings recognized for what it is — it is wistful, to say the least, to project an ecumenical council truly representative of Christendom in the near future. To argue that only such a council can determine the immediate choice of a church on the issue at hand is to deny the primacy of conscience in every Christian decision. Each person is called by God to give allegiance to the truth as prudently as he can in the circumstances in which he lives. Where general councils cannot be called, decisions must be made beneath that conciliar level, although they should always be made on the broadest consensus possible. The ecumenical consequences of an act by a church must be seriously taken into account in any prudent deliberation about the act, but, once again, truth — not the consequences of choosing the truth — must be the ultimate criterion in decision making.

— II —

Turning now to the positive argument I suggest for the ordination of women to the presbyterate and episcopacy, we are led to consider the mystery of God's most intimate life as we know that life in the revelation of Jesus Christ and the Spirit.

Many arguments against ordaining women to the presbyteral and episcopal orders are based on the Fatherhood of God. The Fatherhood of God is a "given" in the Christian revelation and cannot be compromised. The Fatherhood of God encompasses the relationship of every creature to God, but, in the fullness of Christian revelation — in the intimate life of God revealed to us — the Father is but one Person of the Trinity

In traditional trinitarian theology a type of priority is claimed for the Father over the Son and Holy Spirit. But nowhere are creaturely categories more inadequate than in trying to describe God's life. Thus, as soon as the priority of the Father is stated, it is given severe qualification. For example, the priority is said to be neither temporal nor essential: the Father did not exist *before* the Son and Holy Spirit, nor is the Father more God than the other Persons of the Trinity.

"Properly understood" no Person of the Trinity can be known apart from the other Persons: the Persons indwell each other, and the Persons can ultimately be described only by their relations to each other, not by derivation from a norm such as human sexuality. The uniqueness of the Christian understanding of God consists in the contention that the one God is, in some mysterious way, a loving, knowing community of Persons. The fullness of Person, even in God, is thus seen to be person in community. "Person" and "community" are not external realities: persons can be their full selves only in community, and true community is always a community of persons.

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If the mysterious community of Persons in the Godhead were taken, as I think it should, as the primary Christian revelation of God's nature, human persons in community would be seen to be better analogical symbolization of God than the sex of human beings taken individually.

Community depends upon difference. That truth is necessary to understand many of the ancient trinitarian controversies. The ultimate mind of the patristic church was, for example, that each Person of the Trinity is a complete and unique Person in himself: God is not just one Person who appears in different modes or masks. Thus a Greek word (*hypostasis*), which normally referred to concrete individuals became applied to each of the Persons of the Trinity in orthodox usage to show each Person's distinctness from the other Persons. The terminology adopted — applying, as it did, to material entities in the world — was the most scandalous that could be used about a nonmaterial God. Use of the term proclaimed the distinctness and difference of the Persons of the Trinity from each other in a way which could never be compromised. Community is founded upon difference even in the Godhead, and the difference of the trinitarian Persons from each other cannot be diluted.

1 the human order, sex is one type of difference among

persons and so is constitutive of human community. There can be human community among persons of the same sex, but the Judeo-Christian tradition has always seen sex in its communal role. In the creation story as told in the second chapter of Genesis (v. 18), God created woman because "it is not good that man should be alone." Woman was therefore created to constitute the fullness of human community. The first chapter of Genesis (v. 27) indicates that the "image of God" extends to both male and female.

All of these factors taken into consideration, a convincing case can be made that the communal, trinitarian nature of God would better be shown by a presbyteral community embodying the fullness of human difference in community, as God created that difference, than could be shown by an all-male community alone.

This is the place to make one or two more remarks about the Fatherhood of God. We have already noted that God transcends sex, so the "Fatherhood" of God does not mean God is male. We have also noted that mother love and father love are constitutive of human relations and that, after the example of Christ himself, Christians are told to call God *Abba*. Because God as *Abba*, Father, transcends human sexuality we should not be surprised to find that attempts to explicate God's Fatherhood in terms of male typology alone prove woefully inadequate. God, as source of mother love, contains and manifests that love eminently within his Fatherhood. Julian of Norwich, a fifteenth century English anchoress; never wished to compromise the Fatherhood of God or maleness of Christ; yet she spoke of the "Motherhood" of God and even called Christ "Mother Jesus," when she compared him feeding us with himself in the Eucharist to a mother's feeding of her child.

As described by Erich Fromm, mother love finds us in being, making us secure and glad to be alive. Mother love is unconditional, the love of acceptance and nurture. That very love of acceptance, mercy, and nurture — characteristics of mother love — is intrinsic to the understanding of God as "Father" in Joachim Jeremias' chapter "Abba," in *THE CENTRAL MESSAGE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT*. Jesus Christ, our acceptance by and nurture from the Father, reveals that the Father cannot be understood in terms of abstract, male typology alone. Such a relation by a Son is testimony that he is, indeed, the

transcendent Word of a unique and transcendent Father. Through our acceptance and unconditional love by the Father through the Son we know it is good simply to be alive. That is the feeling infants should first receive from their mothers.

Turning from remarks about "fatherhood," we may well turn our attention toward "priesthood." Let us look at the New Testament doctrine. There can be no doubt that in the New Testament Jesus Christ is the one and only great High Priest. His priesthood is unique, taken from no human being. It is also a well-known fact that nowhere in the New Testament are ministers called priests. In 1 Peter 2:9 Christians are said to be "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation," in a manner referring directly to Exodus 19:6, "and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The priesthood of Exodus 19, it is pointed out, applies to Israel as a collective whole (the reference is not to a priesthood distributed to individuals); it is not a priesthood of the Levitical type. The latter is a particular priesthood instituted for ritual, cultic purposes. The royal priesthood of Israel involves the community as a whole and is primarily concerned with Israel's witness to God before the nations of the world.

The suggestion is made that Christians should not confuse the particular, ritualistic priesthood (based on the Levitical model) with the royal priesthood of the whole People of God (based on the Exodus model). Viewed in that perspective, the particular, ordained priesthood is not a "specification" and "intensification" of the royal priesthood every Christian enters by baptism. Thus it would be wrong to argue that, since men and women are already found within the royal priesthood, no new theological issue is involved in admitting women to the particular priesthood. But whatever view a person takes of the relation of the particular priesthood to the royal priesthood, one point is clear: the particular priesthood exists for the enablement of the universal, royal priesthood. Witness in the world to the all-sufficiency of Christ's High Priesthood is the purpose of the universal priesthood of the church. The particular priesthood exists for, and is in the service of, the universal priesthood.

The ordained ministry is called into being for the royal priesthood — for the community — to enable it to be itself and to make its witness in the world. In a basic way, the needs of the royal priesthood are determinative of the particular priesthood.

In its witness to the Fatherhood of God, the witness of the royal priesthood to the world is a ministry of reconciliation. That being the case, specialized Christian ministries, including the particular priesthood, must themselves be enabling agencies of reconciliation. The purpose of all Christian ministry is to build, not destroy, godly community.

To ordain women to the presbyteral and episcopal orders is, I believe, to take something of a chance, but I also believe the chance is worth taking if it is done by community for community.

Earlier typescript conclusion to the foregoing essay 20.
 by Arthur A. Vogel, circulated publicly to the House of Bishops of
 the Episcopal Church in June 1975.

Ad hominem appeals to individual theologians and leaders of other churches are obviously not determinative for the decision at hand. Such opinions may have important truth content and be descriptively accurate, but it is the truth and the accuracy which are significant--not the position of the person speaking. Having said that, but recognizing the appeals constantly made to authorities in the discussion in which we are involved, I would like to point out that Karl Rahner, in 1964, wrote about the impossibility of ordaining women as priests and stated that churches which did ordain women to the ministry had no concept of "sacramental consecration" which causes the fundamental difference between laity and clergy. There are now, however, Roman Catholic theologians who acknowledge the sacramental consecration of which Rahner spoke and who also believe that women can be ordained priests. Piet Fransen of the University of Louvain, writing in Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology, edited by Karl Rahner, states that the ordination of women is not a dogmatic matter. He believes that the question should be solved in terms of the needs of the People of God at this time, and he believes the solution should be pluralistic, depending on the situations of different people in different places. His position seems sound to me.

A Study Committee commissioned by the board of directors of the Catholic Theological Society of America to review

and criticize the bilateral consultations occurring between the Roman Catholic Church in the United States and other Christian Communions, stated in its Report of July 1972: "As regards the ordination of women, this committee agrees with the PresCath consultation that there are no clear obstacles to this in revelation of Christian dogma. It would be important, however, not to force women abruptly into patterns of ministry that have been developed with a view to an exclusively male clergy."² The well-known historian of theology, Fr. Avery Dulles, S.J., was chairman of the Committee.

Theologically speaking, I think women can be ordained to the presbyteral and episcopal orders according to Catholic theology. Granting the consistency of such ordination with Catholic principles, there would still no doubt be ecumenical consequences to such acts. Ordination, so described, would deviate from, and so make the practice of our church strange to, the institutional lives of the Roman and Orthodox Churches. "Strangeness" is not a theological category here; it is a personal category. Feelings of that same strangeness would, of course, be found within our own communion. The strangeness to which I refer is a human feeling accompanying any change in a long-established custom (cf. reaction to suggested liturgical revisions), but it cannot be denied. The presence of such strangeness is a complication in human relations. Some

may argue the experience of strangeness is the price which should be paid in a given instance, but the amount of the price and its possible effect should not be denied in any honest appraisal of a total situation. Even under the impulse of grace, it is human beings with all their feelings who must acknowledge their oneness in Christ, and feelings of strangeness make acknowledgement of such oneness more difficult.

In some debates it has been suggested that the church as an institution has seldom been ready for significant social changes of any kind: various minority and labor movements are offered as examples. As the church had to be prodded to accept those changes, it is argued, so it must now be prodded to accept the ordination of women as presbyters and bishops. The nature of institutions is to conserve; thus it is no doubt true that all institutions need proding to accept change. In the instance before us, however, there seems to be an essential difference in the change suggested for the church as compared to the changes alluded to in society at large. The equality of opportunity and dignity accorded human beings in the world is or should be the immediate concern of the royal priesthood--of the church as a whole--as it witnesses to the love of God in the world. The equal dignity of all human beings before God is clearly taught in the death of Christ for the world on the cross. Here the scriptural foundation is

clear; Christ did not die for a select few.

That women should be ordained priests and bishops is not so clearly taught in Scripture; it requires more exegesis. Thus it is that the de facto consensus of the community is more important for the ordination of women than it is for the other movements to which we are referring. Since the particular, ordained ministry is uniquely at the service of the Christian community and royal priesthood, it must have overwhelming acceptance by the community in order to be effective.

The purpose of every ministry is to serve; to claim a vocation to ministry is to claim a vocation to service. To feel called to a specialized ministry whose only purpose is to enable the ministry of the Christian community as a whole, is to acknowledge the supremacy of the good of the community as a whole within one's felt, specialized calling. Time and place here become theological factors. If a given mode of a specialized, enabling ministry disrupted the essential, reconciling ministry of the Christian community as a whole--unduly diverting the community's attention from its role in the world to its own internal life--one would have to question whether or not God was in fact calling a person to that ministry at a given time. Once again we must recall that no person has a right to exercise a given vocation: a right to a vocation is a contradiction in terms.

On the other hand, the church as a whole and the Christian community at large cannot forever be delayed in their decision by a minority which constantly threatens schism and disruption if it does not have its way. In some decisions, the majority opinion must be carried out in action, but in the case before us--because of the enabling function of the presbyteral and episcopal orders--the majority should be an overwhelming one. Until such a majority can be obtained, teaching and persuasion should be the means by which an overwhelming conviction is built up.

Footnotes

¹ Why Not? Priesthood and the Ministry of Women, ed. by Michael Bruce and G. E. Duffield. Appleford, Abingdon, Berkshire: Marcham Books, 1972, p. 80.

² The Catholic Theological Society of America: Proceedings of the Twenty-Seventh Annual Convention. Vol. 27, p. 205.