

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Women's Ordination: The History of the Controversy Clarified  
by Peter Day

Dear Editor:

I am perplexed at the remarks in the December issue of Ecumenical Trends of the unnamed Vatican official who is said to be experienced in ecumenical relations. His description of the process of deciding the question of ordination of women could only be paralleled by an uninformed Anglican characterizing the process of defining a mariological dogma as "Pope Pius IX woke up one day and decided that the Blessed Virgin was immaculately conceived in spite of the position of Thomas Aquinas on this subject."

To describe the process of consideration of the question as to change a "primitive tradition just by counting heads" fails to take into account the leadership of the bishops, both in the Episcopal Church in the USA and in the worldwide Anglican communion; and, in the House of Deputies of the Episcopal Church, priests and laypeople were not counted as individuals but as representatives of these orders in the several dioceses, with the four in each order casting a single vote stating the view of the majority. Even more to the point is the fact that the question of women in ecclesial ministry has had a long history in the Episcopal Church.

The question was first discussed in General Convention in 1871 and in 1889, 18 years later, it was decided in favor of their admission to the order of deaconess. In the ensuing 87 years, deaconesses were found serving in places where no educated male was to be found -- among the hillbillies in the Tennessee mountains and the Indians in the Okefenokee swamps, where the only person able to read was the deaconess herself. She began to preside over the assembly because that was the only way in which the Scriptures could be read, and Matins and Evensong could be conducted. On rare occasions, a priest was persuaded to come in and celebrate Holy Communion for the isolated community.

Little by little, the canon on deaconesses was made less restrictive, male diaconate came into being as a permanent office, not merely as a step to the priesthood, and in the General Convention of 1970 it was decided that deaconesses were true deacons.

Fifty-six years ago, the Lambeth conference of Anglican Bishops from around the world took up in 1920 the broad question of women in ministry, in a passage of the encyclical letter which included the following important statement of principle on the customs (not the dogmas) of the Church: "We feel bound to respect the customs of the Church, not as an iron law, but as results and records of the Spirit's guidance. In such customs, there is much which obviously was dictated by reasonable regard to contemporary social conventions. As these differ from age to age and country to country, the use which the Church makes of the service of women will also differ."

For a scholarly Roman Catholic statement, the Vatican official might look at the recent report of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on the relation of the Scriptures to the issue of ordination of women. The members

voted 12-5 that scriptural grounds alone are not enough to exclude the possibility of ordaining women as priests.

In the Episcopal Church, articles in The Anglican Theological Review, statements by theological faculties, and books on theological issues and on human sexuality, with contributions by psychologists and sociologists as well as theologians, have indicated that a sizable majority of the theological community believes that the ordination of women to priest and episcopate is now theologically acceptable, though a significant minority is not so persuaded.

A careful review of the question was undertaken by Roman Catholic and Anglican scholars, leading to a statement by ARC, the Anglican Roman Catholic Consultation, in 1975. Its conclusion was that each Church must decide the issue for itself.

The Lambeth Conference in 1968 expressed the opinion that biblical and theological considerations were not decisive either for or against such ordination. The House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church in 1972 voted an expression of opinion by a narrow majority in favor of the eligibility of women to these orders. When the question came before the House again in 1974, the same subject was approved by an overwhelming majority.

At the 1976 General Convention, the House of Bishops voted by a smaller majority to approve the ordination of women by way of canonical change. Presumably some who considered such ordination valid did not think it timely. The vote was 95 to 61, approximately a 60% majority.

Concurrence with the bishops was upheld in the order of presbyters by a narrow majority and by a somewhat larger majority in the order of laity. The vote was by dioceses, and it indicated that in 43 dioceses all three orders, the bishop, the priests, and the laity, were ready and willing to receive women in priestly ministry. The rules of the House of Deputies provide that more than a simple majority is necessary on controversial issues by counting in the negative dioceses which are evenly split on such an issue. The affirmative votes among the clergy were 60 vs. 38 negative, 16 divided; in the lay vote, 64 vs. 30 negative, 12 divided. Approximately 61% of those who expressed an opinion in the clerical order and 65% in the lay order voted in favor. This is only a rough testing of the sensus fidelium, but it gives some indication of the desirability of a change which had already been declared possible by the House of Bishops in 1974 by a vote of 97 to 35.

Thus, our theologians have done their work, our college of bishops has exercised its teaching office, and the convention voted to put the change into effect in dioceses which are ready for it.

The question of diaconate for women is now under discussion in the Roman Catholic Church among theologians of the highest repute. This was where the Episcopal Church began its deliberations in 1871. Some Roman Catholic theologians are also raising the question of priesthood and episcopate, and in the United States vigorous groups exist to press for serious consideration and magisterial decision. If an affirmative decision is made, the episcopal conferences and dioceses which put it into practice will probably be the ones that have been making the teaching of Gaudium et Spes a living reality in the Christian community.